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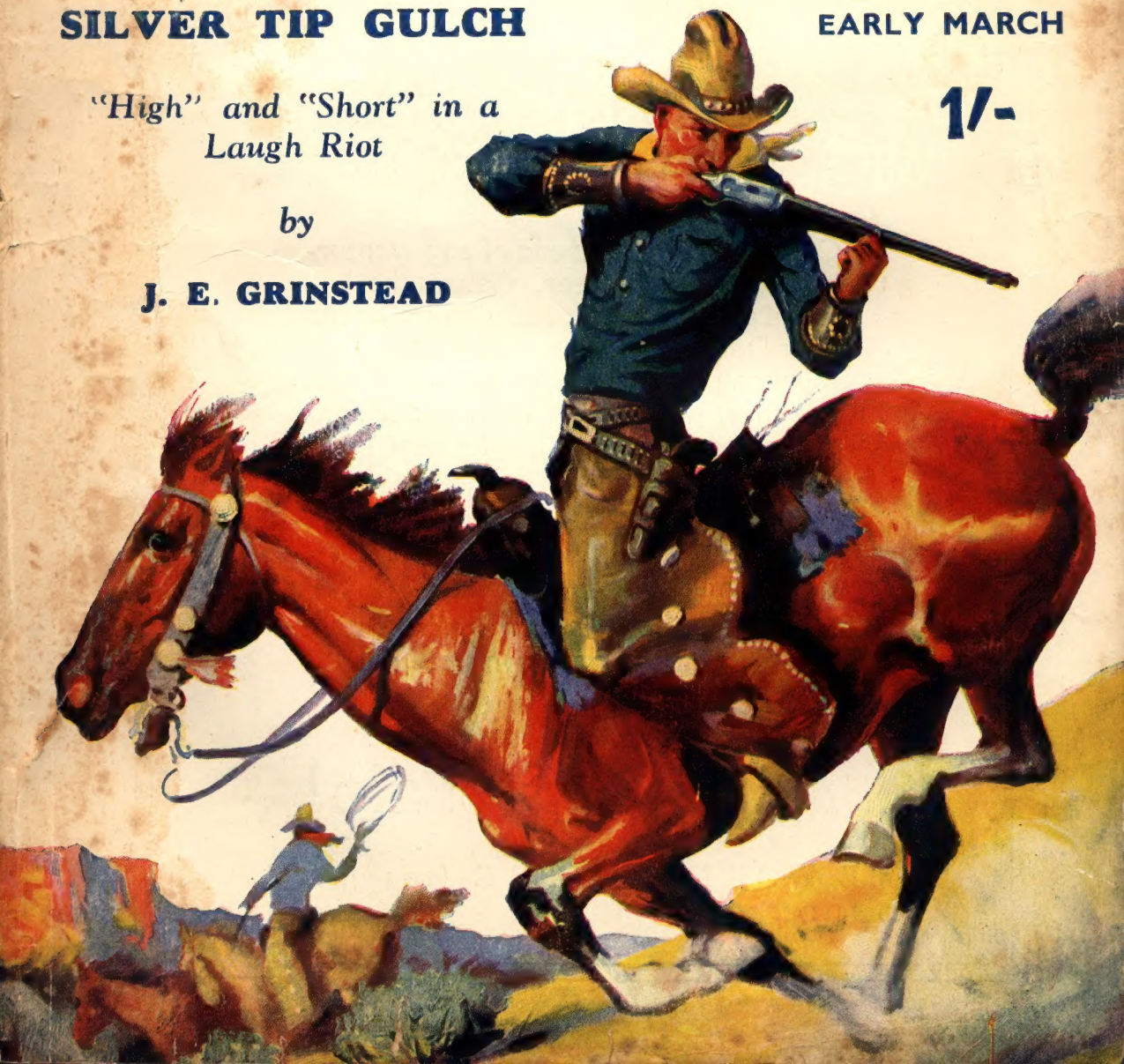

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CODE OF THE LAWLESS

A Thrilling Novel Of Butch Cassidy And His Wild Bunch

By Harry F. Olmsted

With Shadows Dogging Their Trail And A Price On Their Heads, The Wild Bunch Rode To Town To Hold Their Own Court And See That The Law Got Its Man

Night was engulfing Medicine Rock when Sheriff Matt McBride returned to his office in the jailhouse. The mellowness that usually followed his evening meal at the Chink's was sadly lacking. His steak had been tough, the pie sour, the coffee weak. Even the cigar, one of his favorite brand, which he rolled in his lips, had tasted like burning trash. The endless whine of the wind seemed doubly obvious this evening and its eerie note but added to his already depressed spirit. Old Matt was flooded with gloom.

It was bad enough to have the Wild Bunch drawing the lightning of public condemnation down upon his head, with their bold lawlessness. But the Rattlesnake Mountain Gang were adding their compli-

The gambler taunted him while they took the star from his vest.

cation; political enemies were lifting their voices in a concerted clamor for his resignation. A rockin' chair sheriff, they were howling. One who'd laid on the shelf collectin' dust too long to know what sheriffin' was all about. And, if that were not enough to drive a man to red likker, there was Cleve, Matt's boy. A salty kid with plenty iron in his system an' a slick gun hand. With a yen for poker, a thirst for whiskey and herding with the wrong kind of companions by choice.

The grizzled lawman sat there in his fast-darkening office, giving way to a gnawing depression of spirit. But the clatter of a fast-running man outside gave his bitter reflections pause. Matt surged up as a gasping townsman came plunging through the door.

"There yuh are, Matt!" the man managed through his retching breath. "I . . . I figgered you was out, there bein' no light. Git on yore guns! The's bin a murder down in the Wyomin' Bar! They're holdin' the killer!"

Then he had plunged outside and was running back toward the center of town. Matt sighed as he filled his great chest and drew his lithe six-feet-one erect. Another killin'! Whiskey and cards and guns! In the notorious Wyoming Bar! A poison combination for the reckless kid punchers who hungered for life . . . and found death.

With a gesture of annoyance, the old man smoothed back his grey hair, worn long after the frontier style, clapped on his flat, black Stetson, buckled his gun belt about his narrow waist and started for the Wyoming Bar. His hands swinging perilously close to the butt of his weapon, his grey eyes narrowed dangerously.

With professional formality, he shoved through the flimsy saloon doors, paused there to accustom his eyes to the bright lights. A gaping and excited crowd hid from his gaze the object of their curiosity. And Laramie Carver was moving toward him with the graceful stalk of a cat.

Laramie was a handsome scoundrel, nocturnal and subterranean in his activities. A top hand with cards and women and a reputed lightning flash with a gun. Laramie owned the Wyoming Bar and, so rumor had it, was the brains of a lot of things that happened under the light of a high-soaring moon. But he was smart enough to cover his sign along dim and lawless trails and to assume a dry and benevolent piety regarding the lapses of others. There was a fierce light lurking in his pit black eyes as he faced the sheriff.

"Cold-blooded murder, Matt," he said, softly, stroking his stiff, spike mustache. "Never give my houseman a chance. Ain't that right, boys?"

"Plumb unprovoked!" sang out someone.

"Cut an' shoot, without a kiss my foot or go to hell!"

"Cold as steel an' twice as deadly!"

The old sheriff looked at the darkly handsome saloonman, his eyes running over the man's smooth unctuousness with unmasked dislike.

"I'm not the judge," he said, cynically, and stepped toward the milling ring of patrons.

As he broke through that ring, his eyes shuttled to the dead man spreadeagled on the filthy floor. Then to the livid, struggling youngster who fought the ungentle grip of the saloon bouncer and two others. And something seemed to go out of Old Matt. He seemed to shrink and recoil, as from a deadly body blow.

"You . . . Cleve?" he murmured, as if his eyes were playing him tricks.

The angry, excited youngster, flesh of Matt's own flesh, blood of his blood, quit his struggle, drew himself up proudly. He was trembling and his eyes writhed with a mighty inner rage, but his voice was low-pitched and steady.

"He run in a cold deck, Dad!" he explained. "I caught him cold. He dragged out his iron an' had it on me before I drew. It was me or him an' he drawed the losin' end!"

A raucous laugh lifted from the crowd, Laramie's the loudest and most taunting of all.

"That's good!" he shouted. "It's a well-known fact that Hole-card Harris never went heeled. Didn't have to. He was a good dealer an' a honest one. I won't have no other kind workin' fer me. Yore boy, Matt, shot his wad on three aces. Hole-

card had a full an' was reaching for the chips when Cleve shot him. It was cold . . . cruel."

Cries of concurrence rose from the assemblage, and Matt ran his eyes about the ring. Not a decent townsman among them. Saloon bums, fly-by-nights, plug uglies, men without obvious means of support. Dregs-men! Matt knew the type, felt a surge of deadly rage at their unholy mirth. Men who had always crossed him. Renegades living in freedom by sufferance of cagey Laramie Carver, to whom they looked for orders . . . and pay. Rats!

"Shut up!" bellowed the old lawman. "Don't give me none of yore lyin' lip till I ask fer it, which I won't!" He bent a terrible, boring glance upon the bouncer and his two companions, a glance that made them cringe. "Take yore filthy hands offa him!" he raged, "before I bend a gun over yore hard skulls."

When they had loosed the angry youngster, Matt turned the dead man over with his boot, went over him for weapons. There were none. The sheriff's eyes lifted to his boy.

"Where's his gun, son?"

"I . . . I don't know," answered Cleve McBride. "They grabbed me an' I didn't have a chance to see what they done with it."

"Here's the gun, Sheriff," grinned Laramie Carver, tendering a weapon. "Cleve McBride's gun. The only gun there is. If he wasn't yore boy, you could bust the truth out of him. But don't try to ring in no self-defense plea; not with twenty of us bein' eye witnesses to cold murder. Take him to jail. I'll come down in the mornin' an' sign a murder complaint."

Matt nodded soberly, took Cleve's arm and left the saloon. A strange silence falling over the room behind them like the threat of something that crawls in the darkness and strikes. Down in the jail, father and son faced each other, Matt anguished and distraught. Cleve angry and touchy.

"Son," murmured the old man. "You've likely laid my preachin' up to a crotchety ol' codger that's plumb outlived his usefulness. It's always bin thataway with life. But I reckon you see now what I was drivin' at. Likker, guns, cards an' bad company will bog down better men than you an' me."

"I tell yuh . . . ," rasped the youngster, ". . . I killed him in self-defense. You don't believe me, do you?"

"Shore I believe you. You think I want to believe that a son of mine is a back-shootin' skunk? Of course I believe you. But that ain't the point. The man's dead an' the's twenty lyin' witnesses over yonder jest thirstin' to put yore neck in a noose."

"You Think I Want To Believe A Son Of Mine Is A Back-Shootin' Skunk?"

"They're lyin', dad! A good lawyer can break 'em down an' peg 'em for the liars they are. I can't see why they turned on me thataway. They was my friends an' now, all of a sudden, they . . ."

Old Matt shook his head dolefully. "Your friends!" he murmured bitterly. "They was never nothin' but my enemies. Fer months, while they was ribbin' up a way to strike at me through you, they've bin howlin' fer my hide to tack up on the barn door. Well . . . ," he scratched his head in an agony of puzzlement, ". . . now the question is what we can do about it."

"Lock me up!" blurted Cleve, angrily. "If yo're scairt of yore job an' yore reputation, put me behind the bars. That'll

put you in the clear an' I'll take my medicine."

For an instant, Old Matt looked at this stubborn, prideful, bronc-spirited counterpart of himself. Then the blood was draining from his florid face and he was stiff as water-leeched leather. Out of the night had come an ominous undertone, a swelling murmur that is never mistaken, once heard. The voice of the blood-hungry mob. With a leap, Matt gained the window, looked out. The saloon lights, at the Wyoming Bar, played upon a sea of contorted faces that seemed to float from the inside and along the street. An ugly-tempered hang crew, spreading their virus to any and all they came in contact with, regardless of leanings.

From Cleve McBride came a moan. "It's me they want! They're comin' fer me!"

"Quick!" croaked Old Matt, grabbing the boy and shoving him toward the back.

Out the rear they went, slamming the door behind them. Through the darkness they sped like wraiths, with the din of that awful tide stinging their ears. Back behind, in the sheriff's corral, saddled ponies always waited. It remained only for them to jerk tight the latigos, mount and ride. Before the mob had reached the jailhouse, the two McBrides had cleared the town and were breasting the night breeze as their ponies carried them swiftly across the prairie toward that haven of wanted men—the Hole-in-the-Wall!

For an hour they rode the spurs, Matt holding behind his boy to cast an anxious ear along the backtrail. Having heard no hint of pursuit, Matt called a halt where the swelling plain pitches down toward the sparse timber of Sioux Creek.

"Here's where I quit you, son," he said, a touch of bitterness in his tone. "Tonight I've weighed the promise I made yore dead mother an' the oath I taken when they pinned the star on me. It wasn't hard to decide that my promise to take care of you is more important than to cleave to the letter of the law, so help me God. Yonder's the Red Wall, where the law ain't very apt to look for you. Yonder . . ." he pointed to the south, ". . . lies new ranges where yo're not knowed an' not wanted. If my advice is worth anything, think some about ridin' down there an' startin' fresh an' clean. An' . . . an' if I can ever help you, son, call on me. Good bye . . . an' good luck."

"But you . . .?" queried the youngster, taking his father's extended hand. "What are you goin' to do?"

"I'm goin' back!" murmured Old Matt, grimly. "Back to face 'em. Mebby to lay my star in their hands an' tell 'em to go to hell. Mebbyso not. I'll see how the play comes up. But you . . . you get the hell outa this before they wind you. An' make it . . . south."

"South," grunted Cleve, with a stiffness that startled Matt, "is too far away. Too far from . . . Laramie!"

With a vicious jerk at his reins, he reared his horse, spun it on its hind feet and lit out at a hard gallop. Heading west. Toward Hole-in-the-Wall! Old Matt's shoulders slumped and he sat his saddle like a man crushed. Sat there like a man stricken until the faint beat of hoofs had receded into the vague murmur of the night. And not until then did he stir. A sigh shook him.

"Youth!" he said, softly. "Reckless, hot-headed, impatient of advice. I reckon it's allus bin thataway."

Wearily, he reined his pony back toward Medicine Rock. He was within a short distance of the town, following the wagon road in deep meditation, when the low hillside seemed to spout flame. Through his body ran the exquisite agony of bullet pain and he clutched desperately at the horn. Reaching for his gun as his startled pony broke into a desperate run. Tortured

with helplessness as he recognized Laramie's bawled, "Got 'im!"

Gritting his teeth against the awful torture of a bullet-shattered back, Old Matt clung in desperation to that last spark of consciousness. The lights of the town dancing queerly before his aberrated vision. Nausea attacked him. He swayed drunkenly, jabbing in his spurs even as the black pit of unconsciousness claimed him. Behind he could hear what seemed to be the beat of hoofs and the scornful laughter of Laramie Carver. Before him, as darkness closed down to ease his agony, a blot of staring faces loomed, like figments of some disordered dream.

ULTIMATUM

Medicine Rock took good care of Old Matt. They could do no less, it was argued, for the sheriff he had once been. So, in spite of his lawlessness, that had brought him to this pass, they nursed him carefully. For bitter, trying days his life was despaired of. But whang leather and tempered steel are not easily destroyed. Matt lived.

For weeks he lay in those uncomfortable back splints. Suffering. Thinking about Laramie Carver's triumphant cry on the heels of roaring guns. Wondering as to the fate of his boy, Cleve. Saying little and refusing to let his mind dwell upon the possibility of dragging invalid years.

Slowly his strength came back. The splints could not be removed, but life took on an added luster when they lifted him into a chair and carried him out into the air. The ten months of convalescence passed slowly and then the splints came off. Matt felt the weakness in his back, would always feel it according to the medico. He was having to learn to walk all over again. He could never fork a pony again, they had told him. Yet, strangely, life stretched luringly before him and Matt searched his consciousness in vain for traces of his old bitterness.

He was drawing on his first pair of boots in nearly a year, when a delegation of his old friends paid him a visit. Among them the county commissioners. They were obviously troubled.

"Glad to see you stirrin' around again, Matt," the Commission chairman spoke for the gathering. "An' we feel like we'd orta do a little somethin' for you. Buy you a little home here in town, or mebby a small spread out on the range somewhere. Maybe buy you a few breeding cattle or set you up in some kind of business. If we only knew what it was you leaned to'rds . . ."

"Me?" Old Matt grinned at them. "I lean to'rds sheriffin', gents. My term's got most a year to run; I've got a lotta lost time tuh make up an' a lotta things that are waitin' to be done."

"Now le's look at this thing honest," protested the chairman. "Yore deputy—Hunk Bolton—he's done a good job. Things is runnin' along smooth . . . oh, outside the usual run of lawlessness. Why don't you let him run the office? Draw yore pay an' put in yore time gettin' well."

Old Matt shook his head stubbornly. "No use, gents. I was elected to do a job. I was just started on it when they cut me down. Hunk's a good boy, does just what he's told an' I'd like to see him sheriff when I turn over the badge. But not till I've served my term. Few days now, I'll have my pins under me an' be rearin' to go. I'm cleanin' up this county, startin' with Medicine Rock. I've had a lotta time to think; it'll be you gents' turn when I start the fireworks. Matt McBride's comin' back in circulation."

"But . . ."

"No buts, gents. My mind's made up. As fer them things you'd like to do fer me, the's nothin' doin'. Thankin' you kindly. The county don't owe me nothin'.

The shoe's on the other foot. I've drawed nearly a year's pay fer nothin'. I aim to give you all value received. Tell Hunk I said to dust off my desk an' to muck out the cells. We'll be havin' boarders sooner'n he thinks."

They left, shaking their heads dubiously. Patently disappointed. And Old Matt permitted himself the ghost of a smile. They had come to ask for his resignation and Matt believed he could see Laramie's fine hand in that play. Well, Laramie was in for more than disappointment unless . . . Matt's drawn face went bleak and bitter as he put his shaky legs in motion, holding to the backs of chairs as he exercised his softened muscles.

Back at his desk, Old Matt waited for the strength that seemed so slow in coming. Hunk Bolton was kind, but Matt could see it in his eyes. Only a shell of the man who had gunned Custer County full of law and order in an earlier day. A man shot to doll rags and who never could top a horse again. A man whose whang leather and steel were gone and whose hand could never match the draws of lawless men who were slowly but surely taking over the range. The Rattlesnake Mountain Gang.

While he waited, Old Matt lent his ears to the talk that was rampant in Medicine Rock. Talk about how he had lawlessly conspired to free his murderer son. Talk of how he had lost his grip and was standing fairly in the way of any adequate law enforcement. Talk that Cleve McBride had been seen in a number of places riding with Butch Cassidy and the Wild Bunch. And through it all, Old Matt passed with a poker face and with every effort bent toward building up his strength.

Time passed. And with each passing day, Old Matt's grimness deepened. The town bank was robbed. The Rattlesnake Mountain boys, they said. At no time during that day or the succeeding night was Laramie Carver in evidence. Matt was watching the man like a hawk. In a moment of bitterness, he voiced his belief to Hunk Bolton. The deputy was skeptical. Laramie, he said, had gone down to Longhorn Ford, on the Platte, on a cattle buying deal.

That was the lead Matt had waited for. Longhorn Ford! A forty mile ride. Could he make it? The doc had said he'd never ride again. The doc had lied. He'd ride again if it killed him. He did and it didn't. Though many a time during that trip, the old sheriff cursed his pain, cursed the man who had crippled him, and in the same breath prayed for the strength and fortitude to bear his cross.

Where the breaks of the Rattlesnakes stretch twisted fingers greedily toward the Medicine Bow of Platte River, Old Matt paused to stare through the newly fallen darkness. Here, at Longhorn Ford, tens of thousands of Texas cattle had bawled their way in the one-time mighty hegiras. Yonder, where the lone light burned beyond the shallow flow of the river, was Muddy Jack's log saloon, Matt's destination.

As Matt's pony nuzzled the cooling river flow, the old sheriff let his mind toy with the peril of his quest. Muddy Jack's was a place of evil repute, rendezvous of outlaws and men of questionable callings. It was jokingly said that murder was cheaper in Muddy Jack's log saloon than good likker. It was a rambling place of countless lean-to's set in a sinister cottonwood motte at the very margin of the river. A place of bullet-scarred walls and blood-stained puncheon floors. A place filled with musty relics of a dead past and poignant echoes of countless violences. Many, many years before, Jack had started in one log room, with a barrel of Injun likker and a dozen tin cups. With the coming of the herds, he had prospered. The closing of the Trail had promised ruin, but still Muddy Jack stayed on,

contented and affluent. And Old Matt believed he knew why.

Old Matt sighed, filled his lungs. He was unutterably weary, quite unfit to brace the layout he was apt to find in this rendezvous of evil. That's why, when he had crossed and tied his pony in the trees, he moved, not to the front door, but to the rear window whence came the light. Pausing beside that aperture, Matt leaned against the wall in his weakness. When his breath was coming evenly and without effort, he drew his gun and looked in. At a table, not six feet from his eye, sat Muddy Jack—a frog-built, weasel-faced man of fifty. Across from him, snarling as he talked, sat Laramie Carver.

they sank into their chairs. Laramie managed a twisted grin.

"What's the occasion, Matt?" he asked, softly. "Hell, put yore gun away; you won't need it. Yo're amongst friends. What fetches you here?"

"I'm here to see you, Laramie," murmured the lawman. "To kill you if you ask fer it; to give you yore chance if you don't. Yore cunnin' has fetched me to a decision. No man kin say honest that I ain't bin fair. But the's a end to patience. I've waited fer my strength; now I'm ready."

"Fer what, Matt?"

"To bootheel a few snakes! Some folks believes in quietin' a rattler by

"I'm Here To Kill You If You Ask For It"

Old Matt wasn't interested in what they had to say. He was more interested in the buzz of many voices and the clink of glassware in the barroom beyond the closed door. Well he knew the type that would be drinking here and what his fate would be if he fell into their hands. But there was no backing out now. Impulsively, Matt stepped through the window.

At sound of his boot upon the floor, the two men at the table surged up, stabbing at their guns. Neither drew. Their hands half lifted as they conceded Matt's drop.

"Well . . .!" rasped Laramie. "If it ain't buzzard bait himself. H'are yuh, Matt. An' what's the rip?"

"Set!" commanded the lawman, moving out of the window and planting his back against the wall. "An' don't make no fuss, if you care to stay hidewhole. In a way, I wish you would put up a holler. A little folksy gunsmoke just between the three of us might clear the air all around. I came here to speak my mind, but what actually happens is strictly up to you gents. Set!"

Their eyes wide as they stared at him,

clippin' off his tail. I believe in choppin' off the head. In this case, Laramie, yo're the head. Ag'in my better judgment, I'm offerin' you the chance of gettin' outa this country . . . an' stayin' out."

Laramie Carver smirked. "Sounds like a threat," he grunted.

"Free country, ain't it?" put in Muddy Jack, sullenly.

"It was," smiled the lawman, mirthlessly, "till certain gents put a strangle hold on it. As fer you, Muddy, I'm orderin' you to close up this hell hole an' light a shuck outa Custer County . . ."

"You can't git away with that legal," blustered Muddy Jack.

"Then I'll do it illegal," answered Matt, grimly. "You've both got till midnight next Saturday. That's the deadline. Don't forget it."

Laramie rolled his eyes pityingly. "You make me laugh, Matt," he chortled. "You're a joke."

"If dyin's a joke," retorted the lawman, "have yore laugh over it."

"You really serious about this?" sneered Laramie. "An' if so, why should I be?"

"For the good of yore worthless hide, feller. Yo're at the bottom of half the skullduggery in Custer County; half the grit in its wounds. I'm settin' forth to clean the sore so it can heal. You tried to kill me, Laramie; nearly succeeded. You framed Cleve to discredit me. I'd be justified in shootin' you down right here, but that ain't my way. You've got yore warnin'. If you disregard it, well . . . that's somethin' else again."

Laramie scowled. "You goin' plumb through with this fool stunt?"

"Plumb through!"

"I'll bust you, McBride!"

"You won't be here to gloat over it, Carver. You'll be long gone or you'll be awful dead."

Laramie shrugged as he lighted a cigaret. "That's plain enough, Matt. But to a man up a tree, it looks like you'd be willin' to shut up about things you can't prove. Yeah, an' to . . . let us say . . . get back some of the mazuma you've paid out in doctor bills this last year."

Matt stiffened, his sunken eyes blazing. It griped him to have this renegade who had so repeatedly outfoxed him offer him a bribe to forget. It but added fuel to his already fierce hate. His old strength and tenacity were gone. Worry about Cleve and the slow healing of his shattered body were retarding his recovery. But he'd never be so weak, so low as to . . .

"Laramie," he said fiercely, "you'll never have enough money to meet my price. Saturday night! Don't forget."

Laramie bounced up, his face red with rage. "You're a fool, McBride. Run or die, sez you. That'll take some thinkin' over. Saturday night, before the . . ." he smiled craftily, ". . . before the deadline, I'll be in yore office with my answer. Fair enough?"

"I've waited a long time, Laramie," sighed Old Matt. "A few days more won't kill me. I'll be expecting you."

With a quick movement, he stepped through the window into the darkness. And as he moved toward his horse, he heard Muddy Joe's anguished voice lifting.

"Cripes, Laramie, that old man's onto us. What we gonna do? Le's kill him."

"Shut up!" came the crisp rejoinder. "Some day you're going to open that loose mouth of yours once too often. If anybody leaves Custer County, it'll be Sheriff Matt McBride. C'mon, le's go in an' lift a drink . . . to Saturday night."

DEADLINE

Saturday night! A chill wind swept the streets of Medicine Rock, a wind heavy with the portent of winter. In his dingy office, Old Matt McBride sat slouched in his swivel chair, staring moodily at criminal faces that mocked him from the placarded wall. Those faces haunted Old Matt. Especially that of his boy, Cleve, whose reward notice had been tacked up during Matt's tenure of pain. Matt hadn't taken it down upon his return. It helped him to forget the dull ache in his back, made him forget his weakness, held him unswervingly to the straight line of his grim intent.

The wind, that whined at the eaves, fetched to his ears the bawl of cattle penned at the yards, the shriek of the switch engine shunting cattle cars into a train. From saloon and honkatonk drifted the clamor of the laughing, cursing, free-handed clan that lined the bars to spend their stake which, otherwise, might have seen them comfortably through the threatening winter. Squeaky fiddles and tin-panny pianos jangled discordantly. Spur chains chimed musically along the boardwalks. Spirited horses whirled new arrivals into the already crowded racks and corrals. For some reason, Medicine Rock was getting a big play this night. And Old Matt believed he knew why.

He was not underestimating Laramie. No man could tell how the renegade would jump. When he came, which he most surely would, with word of his decision, it would be showdown between them. Gunsmoke showdown? Old Matt wondered, decided not. Laramie was a tricky fox and Matt was . . . well, old and broken. A poor match.

Doubt struck through Matt McBride and he shuddered. Or was it the cold? His weakened body, prey now to the Fall chill, was constantly reminding him of what he had once been, and no longer was. The Outlaw moon was rising and the Rattlesnake Mountain Gang were ahorse. And Matt wondered if the hoofbeats out yonder heralded their coming to town to be in on the kill.

The minutes ticked away. One hour. Two. The clock struck eleven and the minute hand started its downward swing. It was starting up again when Laramie came, with Muddy Jack at his side and the County Commissioners at their heels. And half the town following behind, from curiosity or otherwise.

Laramie swaggered in, with a cheery whistle on his lips and an overbearing air of arrogance in his black eyes. Muddy Jack was sullenly hostile; the commissioners patently uncomfortable.

"Well, Matt," Laramie pulled off his right hand glove and slapped it rhythmically into his gloved left palm as he smirked. "You sent fer me. I'm here. Now tell it . . . scary."

Matt let his eyes run morosely over the eager, excited faces that showed outside the open door and thought of that night he had gotten Cleve away from the mob. Laramie had a way with mobs.

"No need to play the abused boy, Laramie," he said, soberly. "You've got two ways to jump an' the answer's up to you. The choice to me is slight. What's it to be?"

"Hrrrrumph!" The commission chairman cleared his throat. "Matt, Carver tells us you've threatened his life. Do I need to remind you that we look for something higher in a sheriff than personal threats and private gun brawls? What's the idea?"

"Tell him!" gloated Laramie, and a brittle laugh welled from out the doorway.

Rage touched the old lawman. "Idea?" he echoed. "The idea won't appeal much to you gents, I reckon. But you all know that when I get an idea strong enough to go on, I go plumb through. Tellin' you what I know won't interest you, because you'd be askin' fer signed papers as proof. I've give Laramie his choice of leavin' Custer County or makin' his fight. That goes as it lays an' the's no room fer augerment."

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"It ain't legal!" protested one of the commissioners. "God, Matt, you're wearin' the star! If you don't stand up fer the law, who the hell will?"

"Our laws is weak," answered Matt, softly, " 'cause they was drawed by weak men. The's laws that strike deeper than man codes, an' extend a heap farther. I'm callin' on one of 'em now."

"Code of the lawless, eh?" sneered Laramie. "Fat chance of a man gettin' justice from a sheriff like this."

"You've enjoyed too much of yore kind of justice, Carver," rasped the angry lawman. "Now, fer a change, you'll taste my kind. Gents . . .," he glanced at the clock, "Laramie has ten minutes to start movin' from this county, bag an' baggage. He may decide to git stubborn. I suggest you boys clear the room . . ."

"You're stark, ravin' crazy!" blurted the commission chairman. "Give up this fool play!"

"Nine minutes!" Matt's soft rejoinder was like a slap in the face.

"You can't do it!" raged one of the commissioners. "We'll remove you for cause!"

"Eight minutes!" droned Old Matt.

"Yo're without authority, McBride! The citizens of Medicine Rock won't . . ."

"Seven minutes!" Old Matt's lips hardly moved, yet all heard the fatal toll.

Laramie's smile had faded. His forehead was scored with wrinkles and his eyes were gloomed with shadows. Muddy Jack was edging toward the door, his teeth bared, his restless hand hovering near his gun. Into the silence of doubt, while men were looking at one another, Matt's tally struck like a keen blade . . .

"Six minutes left, gents!"

The chairman of the commission whirled to the door. "Hunk!" he bawled. "Hunk Bolton! Come on in here!"

Old Matt's faithful, plodding deputy came in, his face flushed, his fine eyes showing all too plainly that this situation was poison to him. Men milled aside to let him in, jostled each other as they surged together for a better view of the interior.

"Five minutes!" from Old Matt, and his eyes were a little awful as he stared unwinkingly at Laramie.

"What you want?" Hunk Bolton demanded hoarsely of the commission chairman.

"Take that star offa that madman!" The chairman's voice trembled with emotion. "Strip 'im of his power!"

Hunk Bolton shrank. "I can't do that," he protested. "He's my boss."

"Do as yo're told!" commanded one of the commissioners, "or we'll replace you . . . tonight!"

Hunk was brave, fearless. He'd face a smoking gun eagerly in the performance of his duty, had many times. But this had him faded. Torn between loyalty to Old Matt and respect for the higher county officials, he turned miserable eyes to the grim old sheriff. Old Matt never shifted his eyes from the darkly scowling Laramie.

"Four minutes!" droned Matt.

It was Matt McBride's welfare, rather than obedience, that prompted Hunk to step in and strip the badge from Old Matt's vest. Old Matt made no resistance, though his eyes did shift from Laramie to the spot where the badge had hung. A spasm of pain flashed across his seamed face; his shoulders sagged and his body seemed to go limp. Then, as if his momentarily forgotten project had spurred life into him, he straightened and the old bleakness again chilled his grey eyes.

"Three minutes!" he announced, frigidly.

"Don't make me laugh!" sneered Laramie. "You got less authority around here now than I have. Go way back an' set down."

"This ain't authority talkin', Carver," murmured Old Matt. "It's doom! Yores

or mine! Beginnin' at twelve o'clock!"

"Give it up, Matt," pleaded Hunk. "The's other ways of killin' a snake beside snappin' off his head. Le's me an' you talk this over.'

"Two minutes!" croaked Matt, and Laramie's steady nerve was giving way before the icy implacability of the old lawman. He was a little pale now, his black eyes darting to the commissioners with mute appeal. The chairman was doubtful, frightened.

"Arrest him, Hunk!" he ordered, weakly. "Throw him in the jailhouse to cool off."

Hunk Bolton's rugged face showed the stress of his inner turmoil. Torn with indecision, he hesitated. And as he still stood irresolute, Matt's fatal count stabbed through the electric silence.

"One minute, gents!"

"Git 'im!" bellowed the commission chairman, to no one in particular, and knocked down two townsmen getting outside. Muddy Jack was only a jump behind him. Laramie, his right elbow angled dangerously, edged toward the fast emptying doorway. And then Hunk Bolton acted. In a flash, he had handcuffs on Old Matt, had divested him of his weapon.

"Sorry, ol' pardner," he murmured, shamefacedly. "But I can't let you commit suicide thisaway. You'll thank me fer it one day."

Old Matt made no answer. Nor did his eyes condemn this deputy he loved almost as a son. In his ears was the taunting laughter of Laramie Carver, as the townsmen swarmed back inside. Men he had rated as friends were openly gloating over his failure. They wouldn't let him help them. All right, if that was the way they felt . . .

All the starch seemed gone from him. Bitter, broken, stoical, he allowed Hunk to lead him through the scoffing, scornful crush and down to the little jailhouse. Law had tied the hands of justice. Laramie was in the saddle and he'd ride hell for leather over the rights of an entire range.

In the jailhouse, Old Matt slumped dejectedly into a chair, Hunk staring at him morosely. The deputy showing plainly his pity for the man he had known to be so strong, so kind and so level headed, the man who now was so weak, so bitter and so patently broken.

"Well, Matt," Hunk said, his voice torn with doubt. "I . . ."

Matt shrugged. "Lock me up, feller. You can't do nothin' else. Matt McBride's finished."

"More Power To Your Gun Hand!"

The deputy shook his head. "No, he's not finished!" he contested. "Yo're not sheriff, an' I'd say you was well off. I don't know what's in yore mind, ol' pardner, but whatever it is, I know it's right. The's somethin' rotten in Custer County an' I betcha that you know more about the lowdown than any man among us. You an' me, we've traveled many a hard trail together. You taught me all I know. Now that the pack's turned on you, I'd be showin' pore thanks to lock you into a cell. I don't want the sheriff's badge that bad. Laramie will likely be incitin' another mob. You ain't gonna be here, Matt . . .," he stooped to unlock the bracelets. "So you go on out the back an' find yore pony. Find yore find an' do yore do. More power to yore gun hand. If ever you need help . . ."

His voice broke. Old Matt was standing before him, wringing his hand, a new light replacing the hopelessness of moments before. Thus do the facets of

friendship gleam in the shadowy coverts of a carnivorous world, where it's dog eat dog and the devil take the vegetarian.

Medicine Rock was drinking, rehashing the coup that had rid them of their rocking-chair sheriff when Old Matt rode silently out of town. The king was dead; long live the king. Matt's thoughts were bitter as he breasted the cold, blustery gale. In a way, he was glad to be rid of the star. Yet its absence, and the manner of its removal, left an open wound that only blood could heal.

Lonely, blind to his uncertain future, he rode again that trail he had ridden before. The time his boy Cleve had galloped at his stirrup. He was thinking of Cleve now, wondering about the youngster. Maybe that's why he kept on until he reached the spot where he had parted from Cleve that night. And there he paused.

As he had done once before, Old Matt looked west toward the gloomy bulk of the Rattlesnakes. And then to the right where the badlands all headed into that treacherous slot known as Hole-in-the-Wall. Then he was looking south, where new places and new faces promised surcease of the pain that freighted his body . . . and his heart. A land of warm sun, of wide ranges and opportunity. Any fool would have sense enough to ride south with things the way they were. But Old Matt was nobody's fool. He turned, just as his boy had turned before him, spurred his pony to the west. Toward Hole-in-the-Wall!

"Youth!" he murmured, only this time it was with a chuckle. "Reckless, hot headed an' impatient of advice. I reckon it'll allus be that away with us kids."

RUSTLING OF THE LEAVES

Through the night, Old Matt McBride rode into the rough hills. His gaunt, stubbled face grim and cheerless. His slitted eyes cold and alert. Danger rode at his stirrup, and he knew it. Here was a land where lawmen were taboo. And, as far as this land knew, Old Matt was still the sheriff.

Before him lay a trackless, broken land of rocks and trees and brush. Cut coulees and blind canyons. A hideaway for wild animals and wilder men. Yonder, vague against the star-dusted sky, lifted the towering peaks of the Wind River Range, with the dark outline of the Rattlesnakes superimposed against them. A restless little wind sighed through the sage, making drear whisperings that sounded like sibilant warnings.

Gritting his teeth against the racking pain in his back, Old Matt held his steady trail lope into the silent, mysterious hills where the puny beginnings of the Powder River swing their half circles northward from the Hole-in-the-Wall. Already he knew he had outgamed his scanty strength. The medico had been half right about him riding again. Certainly, he'd never ride very far . . . ever. Tonight, if the temper of this retreat was as he believed it, he wouldn't be allowed to ride much farther. Nor was he.

Now Old Matt drew rein. There was a vague movement in the shadowy trail ahead. The glint of a gun. The pale, nebulous face of a lurking man and that age-old and compelling command: "Hands up!"

Matt reached . . . high. "An' then what?" he croaked.

"Drop yore gun belt! Keerful as a secret earful, feller, unless you crave long rest. That's the stuff. Now git them dewclaws into the stars while I give a look!"

The man moved forward, gun leveled. A match flared; both men stared; then it was dark again.

"Well, Sheriff . . .!" A deadly note crept into the voice of the bearded trail guard.

"Not no more, neighbor," confessed Old Matt, bitterly. "They taken my star away an' turned the county over to the

Rattlesnake Mountain Gang . . . an' Laramie Carver."

"So-o-o-o?" The man seemed to be studying Matt through the darkness. "An' then," he drawled, cynically, "I reckon you rid out to pick posies in the moonlight; that it?"

"I rid out," rasped Matt, caustically, "to see kin I find my boy. He's ridin', so they say, with polecats an' snakes."

"Figgerin' tuh do what?" asked the man, softly, "was you to find him?"

"Take him outa this country," stated Matt, and knew it to be far from the truth. "Take him south for a new start, where there ain't no need fer lawless law."

The man laughed. "Ain't no such place, McBride," he scoffed. "You know the grass is allus greener in the other feller's pasture."

"You know where my boy is?" asked Matt, eagerly.

"If I did," came the man's chuckle, "I wouldn't tell you . . . or no other man. My advice to you is to haul into the brush yonder, build you a fire an' tough out yore impatience. Fast movin' is one shore ticket to boothill in these parts. Mebby was you to take that advice, sooner or later you might learn somethin' to yore likin'. Mebbyso not. It all depends on the sign. Anyway, as one man to another, I wouldn't ride no farther the way yo're goin'." Carrying Matt's gun belt, the man vanished like a wraith.

Encouraged, rather than otherwise, Old Matt murmured his thanks, took himself into the heart of a brushy little flat and unsaddled. Building a small fire against the chill he curled up and fell asleep. A little nervous that the guard had appropriated his gun, yet more hopeful than he had been at any time since his convalescence.

The sun was in the zenith when Old Matt awoke. Refreshed and out of pain. Hungry. First time he'd been hungry since that bullet had robbed him of his strength. From his saddle pocket, he took jerky and some dry doughgods, made a meal. He was restless but too smart to cater to it. So he lazed in the shade, whittling, waiting. The sun went down. Night spread its ebon mantle over the hill country. The first stars came out and, with them, that breezy, chilling reminder of approaching Winter. Matt built up another fire. He was sitting before it, methodically feeding the flames, when a distant murmur filtered down the coulee. Click of hoofs on stone. Soft drone of human voices.

Into the edge of firelight came two riders, to dismount, trail the reins and rattle their spurs to the blaze. One, tall, withy, moved with the free grace of a stalking cat. His eyes, slitted from looking across countless vistas of mountains and prairie, seemed to be laughing as they sized up the ex-sheriff. His clean-shaven face, tanned and angular, was nothing if not the map of Ireland. The other, undersized and frog built, wore a solemn mustache that added to the chill friendlessness of his visage.

They nodded at Old Matt, then hunkered by the fire as they rolled and lighted cigarets. Matt studied them, strange pricklings chasing themselves up and down his spine. He knew these two at once, not from having seen them, but from studying their likenesses on the wall of his office. The tall one was Butch Cassidy, masterful leader of the Wild Bunch. Man reputed never to have taken a human life, whose ambition had resulted in the death of hundreds. The shorter one was Harvy Logan, better known as Kid Curry, the killer of the same lawless outfit. Neither seemed in a hurry to break the silence, nor did Old Matt rush them.

It was Cassidy who finally lifted his eyes to Matt's.

"I'm told," he advanced, "that Laramie Carver was right put out when his Rattlesnake Mountain boys an' certain deluded

townsmen found the jail empty the other night. Yeah, they say it r'iled him plenty."

Matt sat up, startled. "You mean . . .?" he asked, and hesitated to voice the fear that had suddenly laid icy fingers around his heart. "R'iled, eh? R'iled how much?"

Cassidy inhaled deeply and blew sharply on the coal of his cigaret. It seemed to Matt that the man's face was suddenly bleak and tired.

"As I get it," he explained, "Laramie steamed the boys up to lynch a snuffy old sheriff they'd just jailed after strippin' him of his star. Mebby you know who I mean. Not findin' their coon treed, the boys turned on the deputy that was responsible fer him. The boy wouldn't talk, so they give him a five minute jury trial an' swung him . . ."

"God!" The cry was torn from Old Matt's soul. "Hunk . . . Hunk . . ."

For long moments he sat there, his face buried in his hands. Torn by a thousand burning self-recriminations. Hunk Bolton dead! Murdered by wolves because he had been true to a friendship. Laramie . . .

Now Matt lifted dry and burning eyes to Butch Cassidy, rising to his feet with a certain fatal finality.

"Gents," he said flatly. "Mebby I'm speakin' outa turn. But I'd shore admire to have one of you loan me the use of yore six shooter . . ."

Kid Curry laughed mirthlessly. "Ain't that one fer the book?" he chortled.

Matt flushed. "Gents, a guard in the draw here taken my gun last night. Now I need one . . . need it bad."

"For what?" from Cassidy.

"To kill Laramie Carver!" rasped the ex-sheriff, his eyes glittering. "They euchred me out of it last night . . . but not again. I'll shoot first an' auger the matter afterwards. An' if I can't get a gun," his fingers tensed into talons, "I'll kill him with my hands."

"Sit down!" commanded Butch Cassidy. "You ain't goin' no place yet. I'm expectin' three of my boys from Medicine Rock. When they git here, we'll see."

The note of authority in his soft voice caused Old Matt to slump dejectedly beside the fire. His chest rising and falling with his emotion. Hunk murdered! God!

Time slid past, silence holding the three of them. At last, Cassidy roused. In an instant every nerve was straining in him as he keened the night breeze.

"One pony!" he murmured, as if to himself. "Comin' like a bat outa hell! What went with the other two, you reckon?"

"Mebby this is some other pilgrim roamin' the breaks," suggested the Kid.

The hoofbeats were clearly audible now. Coming at a high lope. The rider swung about a point and would have passed the fire save for Cassidy's hail. He reined across the narrow waterway to the edge of firelight. Then Cassidy was cursing, racing to him. The man was weaving in the saddle, his left arm held in a bloody neck sling, his face grey with pain and exhaustion. He slid into Cassidy's arms and the two outlaws laid him beside the fire.

The man's arm was broken and the speed with which the leader fashioned rude splints and bound it up was miraculous. Not until he had finished, did Cassidy quiz the man.

"What happened, Ben? Where's Snuffy? An' Long Henry?"

"We was drinkin' in the Wyomin' Bar," answered the stricken man, weakly, "when Snuffy spotted Laramie. Before we could stop him, he went fer his gun an' burned a dewlap in Carver's ear. Carver's gang was there an' they went into action. We backed through the smoke with three guns goin'. At the door, they shot the heel offa Long Henry an' Snuffy piled over him. Some gunies come a-runnin' along the walk as I busted outside an' one of 'em pinked

me. I shot myself loose but they nabbed Snuffy an' Long Hank. They're in the jailhouse.

"Coyotein' around, before I got too weak from losin' blood, I heard Laramie tell the crowd they'd nabbed a murderer an' a train robber, both members of the Wild Bunch. That the's too many crooked judges an' boughten juries to allow 'em a court trial. Especially considerin' the chance of Butch Cassidy shootin' the prisoners loose. Near as I could come to gettin' it, he's figgerin' on a kangaroo court. With the boys havin' about as much chance as a snowball in hell."

Cassidy grunted, hiding his emotions behind a poker mask. "Then he's wearin' the star now?"

"Right as rain. Medicine Rock's third sheriff in twenty-four hours an' less."

Cassidy rose, faced Kid Curry. "Fork yore pony an' fetch back the boys, Kid!" he said coldly. "We'll leave Ben here till we git back from town. If the's gonna be a kangaroo court, we want to be settin' in on it."

Silent lipped and with brooding eyes, the killer rose, moved to his pony. When his hoofbeats had faded to silence up the draw, Cassidy turned to Matt McBride.

"Sheriff," he said fervently, "I've had yore boy where I could look after him fer most a year now! Wait . . .!" He held up a restraining hand as anger swept the old rider of law trails. "Not the way you think. He hasn't rode with the outfit. He's too good a boy fer that, an' our race is too near run. His experience with the law is like some of the rest of us, but he ain't gone as far. If I can help it, he won't. All this time, he's been in the Hole, sweatin' an' stewin'. A fine upstandin youngster with the mark of the maverick on him. His grey eyes hung with lights that mean 'take care.' An' now . . . now he's in jail!"

"In jail?" Matt bounced up. "Where? How?"

"The Snuffy we was talkin' about is yore boy, McBride. Hang onto yore temper, feller. I wanted him to stay in the Hole. But he heard you was in trouble an' couldn't be stopped. So I sent two boys down with him. You heard how they come out. So we'll set in on their trial an' you'll go along. An' while we're settin', we may as well sit in judgment on Laramie Carver, brains an' active head of the outfit of petty thieves callin' theirselfs the Rattlesnake Mountain Gang. Them boys has left plenty of our sign on their jobs an' I've looked 'em up. They've got no mountain hideaway; they hang out in the Wyomin' Bar an' Laramie tells 'em how to walk."

"Laramie Tells 'Em How To Walk"

He fell silent and Old Matt was too shocked to speak. Cleve in the clutches of Laramie, as rotten an egg as ever went bad. Due for the same jolt as poor Hunk got. It made Matt writhe, left him all too conscious of his age, his weakness, gave him a feeling of warmth for these lawless men he had always instinctively hated, that they were taking cards in the game that had become theirs as well as his.

The wait seemed interminable, but at last the draw echoed to the drumming of many hoofs. Then a score of riders were ringing the little fire. Outlaws wanted by ten states, nay by an entire nation. Wild cowboys riding horses wearing brands of big outfits in Texas, Colorado, Montana and Dakota. Men without a country; men without homes, families or dreams of the future. Gambling life and liberty for huge stakes that they spent like water to salve their bitterness. Haters of the law and those who prostituted it.

Old Matt studied them as he cinched up his pony. In their faces was the furtive look of men who struck like wolves, who vanished like coyotes. Men who rode the skylines watching always for the man-hunters of the law. Riding ever in fear of the trap and the bullet tabbed with their name. Bounded by the danger in the wind and sunlight, in brush and behind rock, in the blackness of the night. Claiming no roof save the sky, no bed save a tarp in some remote coulee, no friends save those that could be bought with money. Drinking, loving, riding, dying. The Wild Bunch! Riders of the long, dim trail!

Now Matt was ahorse and the bearded man of the night before had given him his gun.

"When we near Medicine Rock, boys," came Butch Cassidy's last minute injunction, "ride a rope apart."

"Just so long as it ain't a rope aloft," murmured the Kid, and smiled at his play on words. He seldom smiled.

Then they were roaring out of the coulee. Heading east. Riders of retribution! Riders of lawless law!

THE COURT OF LAWLESS LAW

A pallid, obloid moon hung low in the east as the cavalcade from Hole-in-the-Wall halted in answer to Butch Cassidy's uplifted hand. Yonder, Medicine Rock slumbered. It was that time of the night known as the "graveyard shift," when men's vitality is lowest and their slumber the deepest. A few lights showed half heartedly in the town, where late gamesters still laid their wagers.

"Kid!" Cassidy's voice crackled like a pistol shot as he faced Harvy Logan. "You take McBride an' two others an' peel that tin jail offa Long Henry an' Snuffy. With Laramie sheriff, there ortn't be more'n one deputy on duty. Don't rouse the town unless it's necessary. Merino, you take three men into the Wyomin' Bar. bend a gun barrel over the night tender's horns an' drag Laramie out of his quarters behind. An' step soft; the boy's a fox. Sundance, you take the rest an' plant 'em across from the Prairie House, where Laramie's plug uglies bed down. They're the boys that have doubled the bounty on our hides. Let yore conscience be yore guides. All right . . . have at it!"

The three groups formed, each taking its respective way. The leader rode directly down the main street, holding his counsel as to his own function in this grim game. At the corral fence, behind the jail, Old Matt, Kid Curry and their two saddle mates trailed the reins and crept toward the dimly lighted jail. After a whispered conference, Old Matt stomped up the steps, shoved boldly through the door. The sleepy deputy, a chill-eyed hanger-on from the Wyoming Bar, surged from his chair. Stabbing for his gun. But Old Matt was first. And the door framed the squat form of Harvy Logan, perhaps the most deadly killer the Northwest ever knew. The man turned pale, croaked as he elevated.

"What is this? What yuh want of me?"

"The keys!" rasped Old Matt, and death was in his tone. "Where are they?"

Thoroughly frightened, the man gulped, nodded toward a desk drawer. Leaving the drop to the Kid, Old Matt got the keys and was prodding the disarmed deputy into the cell block, putting him behind bars. An instant later he had entered a cell and was gripping the hand of the sleep drugged youngster who sat on the edge of his cot.

"Cleve, boy . . .!"

"Dad! You came back here? God, Laramie'll kill you shore . . ." His eyes widened as he caught sight of stony Kid Curry taking the keys to release Long Henry. "Oh! You fetched the boys!"

"They fetched me, son. An' I'm thankin' God right now fer havin' run into men, no matter what's said against 'em.

Pull on yore boots an' le's git outa this. The's work to do, squarin' fer pore Hunk Bolton, an' by big daylight it orta all be over. In the meantime, it may be hell, with fancy trimmin's!"

From the adjoining cell came Long Henry's sleepy query. "H'are yuh, Kid? Knowed you'd fetch the can openers. They won't throw no big welcome fer you though. Town's as full uh hawss thieves as patriots on election day. What's the rip?"

Kid Curry's flat laugh was like a curse. "That's up to the chief," he stated, flatly. "But if it comes to cuttin the combs offa some of these struttin' cockrells of cattleland, we're the boys that can do it, no? Hurry up, git into yore duds!"

They left the jailhouse together. Dangerous tempered and ready for anything. The town was still bathed in quiet, a hush that was suddenly shattered by the crash of a gun, then by the swift shaking out of a six-full pistol load. The din, muffled by walls, came from the Wyoming Bar and it stirred Kid Curry to panther-like action.

"Come on, gunies!" he barked, and broke into a swift run. The other five at his heels.

Medicine Rock came to life startlingly. From all sides broke cries of alarm and men boiled into the street like bees from an overturned hive. From the Prairie House, at the far end of town, came the renegade followers of Laramie Carver, the ones calling themselves the Rattlesnake Mountain Gang. Guns palmed and war in their necks. They were met scathingly by the scattered fire of the waiting long-riders. Some went down. Others sought shadowy coverts. Someone set up a bawl for horses and there was a rush for the corrals, crimson flashes of gunfire marking the course of the movement. Ugly gusts of sound rose toward the stars and crashed back from the rimming head lands.

Old Matt McBride, left behind by his younger and more active companions, legged it down the street, filling rapidly now with milling, shouting, excitedly confused townsmen. Now the Rattlesnake renegades, or such of them as had reached the corral, came roaring out the gate, throwing their guns at anything and everything that showed in the gloom. Old Matt, swerving to follow Kid Curry into the embattled Wyoming Bar, found himself fairly in the path of the oncoming horsemen.

Bullets whining about him, Old Matt skidded to a stop to prevent being run down. One of the riders, hanging low over the withers, veered his pony at Matt. The yellow moonlight limned the snarling snaggy grin of Muddy Jack, Laramie's lieutenant of skullduggery. Old Matt hurled himself aside as a gun flamed in his very face. Hitting his hammer twice as he leaped. With a shrill cry, Muddy Jack went backward out of his saddle, hit the ground, bounced and lay still. The horse pounded past Matt, who stood spent and trembling as the survivors of the Rattlesnake Mountain Gang sped out of town in a hail of long-rider lead.

Now an ear-stinging silence had succeeded the awful turmoil of gunfire. Windows and doors revealed the staring faces of frightened, puzzled townsfolk. Up either side of the street, walking stiffly and with almost feline wariness, came the invading long-riders. Radiating toward the Wyoming Bar, where lights were springing up. From quite another direction came Butch Cassidy himself, his face bleak as winter ice as he warned the denizens of Medicine Rock . . .

"Stand yore hands, gents!" he hollered. "Act reasonable an' none of you'll be hurt much. Act up an' start burnin' powder an' we'll paint this town with blood. Sorry to have disturbed yore sleep. But if you gather over in the Wyomin' Bar, we'll do some explainin'. The's no danger

here fer them that's right. But fer them that's sorta conscience struck regardin' their past lives . . . well, they'd better sneak to the corral, fork their ponies an' slope. Hey, Merino . . .," his voice sheered through the silence, " . . . you got Laramie?"

"Colder'n a banker's heart!" came the exultant answer. "He downed Mustang, but we got him—hidewhole, like you ordered."

"Fair enough!" cried the chief of the longriders. "Everybody in the Wyomin' Bar! Court's about to convene!"

A few crisp orders dropped from his lips. Men leaped to fetch the Wild Bunch ponies to the rear of the Wyoming Bar. Then Cassidy led the way inside. Old Matt moving with them, he and his boy the object of unbelieving looks from the curious townsmen who pushed into the barroom.

"What's the idea, dad?" asked Cleve, anxiously. "What's comin' off?"

"Yore guess is as good as mine, son," answered Matt, morosely. "But if it's what I think it is, it'll be worth seein'."

From a rear room, three of the Bunch dragged angry, struggling Laramie Carver. At sight of Old Matt, he turned white with killing rage. He leveled his finger at the ex-sheriff.

"You!" he yelled. "You're the cause of all this, McBride. Fetchin' in the Wild Bunch, worst wanted men in the West, to tree our town. I want the folks to see you, just as I've allus knowed you was. A lawless lawman. If you wasn't so old an' glandered up, I'd give you somethin' to remember regardin' yore health."

"Shut up, Carver!" rapped Cassidy. "Yore days of health doctorin' an' five minute justice are over, if yo're half as guilty as this court believes you are." He rapped on the bar end. "Order in the court!" he bawled, and silence fell. "Folks, we're gathered here to hear the case of the people of Custer County ag'in' one, Laramie Carver. I'll act as judge. You headmen of Medicine Rock will act as jury. We'll hear one witness fer the defense, one fer the prosecution. Boys"—his eyes shot to the front door—"fetch in Muddy Jack for the defense!"

"It ain't legal!" raged Laramie. "You can't do a thing like this! What am I charged with?"

"Murder of Mustanger Mapes!" snapped the longrider leader. "Driver of the Buffalo Stage, that I'm accused of robbin'! Murder of Deputy Sheriff Hunk Bolton, after the same kind of a court this is, only worse. Now shut up an' let the case proceed!"

Through the front door came Muddy Jack, a longrider supporting him on either side. At first glance, it looked like his forehead was bandanna tied, against a head crease. But closer scrutiny brought a gasp from the crowd. That bandanna merely held a dead man's head back against a slat that had been thrust down the back of his neck.

In a breathless silence, they brought all that was mortal of Muddy Jack forward.

"My God!" yelped Laramie, his eyes starting. "He's dead."

"Not too dead, Laramie," from Butch, as he rapped again on the bar. "Order. Muddy Jack, lift yore right hand an' swear to tell nothin' but the truth, so help you God."

They lifted the dead man's hand and a voice mumbled, "I swear!"

"Muddy," intoned Cassidy. "Who's the leader of the Rattlesnake Mountain Gang?"

"Laramie!" murmured the voice.

"It's a lie!" shrieked Carver.

"Shut up, Laramie. Muddy, who led the Buffalo stage job an' killed Mustanger Mapes?"

"Laramie."

A moaning denial burst from the saloonman, but Butch went sternly on with the

grisly interrogation. "Muddy, who took the gun from Hole-card Harris, the night Cleve McBride killed him in this room?"

"Laramie!" came the mumbled answer.

"That's all," announced Cassidy. "Take him away an' fetch in the witness for the prosecution."

They dragged the dead man away, returning after a silent and awful pause with the stiffened body of Hunk Bolton, fetched from the undertaker's establishment. At sight of his dead friend, Old Matt groaned, hid his eyes with his hand.

"Steady, dad!" murmured Cleve, and slid a strong arm around his sire's shoulders.

A rustling murmur swept the gathering of townsmen and the Wild Bunch riders shot ready hands to their gun butts. But there was no demonstration. His face a chill mask, Butch Cassidy stared into the distorted face of the dead.

"Hunk," he said, with a touch of tenderness in his tone, "who incited the mob that come for you at the sheriff's office, night before last?"

"Laramie," came the croaked answer from one of the two supporting the clay.

"An' who shot Ol' Matt McBride, that night just outside of town?"

"Laramie!" murmured the voice. "He got so bold he bragged about it."

"Cripes!" screamed the breaking saloonman, "why shouldn't I have killed him? He was lettin' his prisoner go. A outlaw posin' as a lawman."

"That's all," snapped Cassidy, with grim finality. "Take Hunk back, boys." And as they dragged the body away, turned his eyes to the crowd, as if weighing their tempers and their emotions. "The evidence is in!" he intoned. "I can see by yore faces that yore verdict is *guilty!* Or is it?" His face narrowed to a savage mask and his hand fell to his gun. "Anybody willin' to offer a dissentin' vote?"

Nobody was. Cassidy nodded sagely. "Good!" He turned to Laramie. "Guilty as charged," he barked. "An' I sentence you to hang by the neck till yo're dead, dead, dead! With no human eye to watch yore struggles, Laramie. Settin' on a loose pony, a rope around yore neck an' a prayer on yore lips that the bronc won't git hungry."

"You can't!" shrieked the saloonman, turning craven in the face of the death he had so jauntily meted out to others. "My God, you folks ain't gonna let him do that to me."

His voice tailed out to moaning cries as they led him out the back. Nor did any man offer to help the doomed man. From the crowd, the chairman of the County Commission was coming forward, his face jerking.

"Irregular!" he was murmuring. "Irregular as hell. But plumb convincing. Laramie had a convincing way too; he fooled us plenty, stirred up the worst in our people. It's easy to see a mistake, when someone proves it to us. Matt," he turned to grasp the ex-sheriff's hand, "what can I say to you? We've done you a great wrong, in more ways than one. The least we kin do is to honor you again with the star an' try to live down our ingratitude."

"You can go a lot farther an' do worse," put in Cassidy, then motioned to his men. "Boots an' saddles, boys. An' best of luck to Medicine Rock!"

Swiftly they filed out, Old Matt and his boy staring after them.

"How about you, Matt?" asked the chairman.

Old Matt flinched. "Oh . . . oh yeah," he said, as if freshly awakened. "Wait just a minute, will you?" he asked, and followed the longriders out the rear. Cleve right on his heels.

The Wild Bunch was ahorse, having tied the moaning, wailing Laramie on a led pony. Dawn was breaking and in the east was the rosy promise of the sun.

Matt strode up to Butch Cassidy, extended his hand.

"Thanks, Butch!" he managed, and could go no further.

"Not at all," grinned the outlaw leader. "Lawless law squares a lot of debts in this old cattleland of ours, Matt. Besides incurrin' some. Yo're lucky, Matt. You got a fine boy an' a place to light, things I'd give my right arm for. Hang on to 'em an' don't never lose 'em. So long, Ol' Trapper, an' the best of luck."

"Le's ride with 'em, dad," pleaded Cleve, earnestly.

"No . . . kid!" Cassidy's face twisted with an inner pain. "That can't be. Not that I wouldn't like it. Lissen . . . !" He turned to his clustered men. "Boys!" His voice was low, controlled with an effort. "The law has come into the sage. In a few days or weeks or months, we'll meet it on four sides of us. An' die. We've made our gamble. We've won; an' in winning, we've lost. The fortunes of war . . . or shall I say, outlawry? It's our move. The Argentine is calling. Scatter out,, an' ride like hell. In six weeks we'll meet. You all know where. Such of us as git through. If I don't show, you'll know I'm dead. Which won't matter. Good bye—good luck!"

He threw up his hand, sank the spurs and roared away. Some followed him. Others reined off to leave the town in different directions. On a rise, at the west edge of Medicine Rock, Butch and Sundance and sagging Laramie Carver paused. And for a long moment were outlined against the wakening sky. Two tragic, indomitable figures leading a moaning coward to his end. Then they had spurred their ponies over the rise and vanished into the mystery that, to this day, shrouds the passing of that amazing outlaw band.

Old Matt dashed moisture from his eyes and looked at Cleve. "Well, son," he said, wearily. "How about me an' you ridin' yonderly an' startin' us a little spread somewhere in the south? Where the warm sun is kind to old wounds an' the country's just cryin' fer young fellers like you an' me to grow up with it. Huh? How about us?"

"Sounds good to me, dad!"

They were sobbing, even as they laughed and gripped hands. It didn't take them long, once they had made up their minds. They found their horses, mounted and rode from Medicine Rock, even as the headmen of the town discussed what they could do for those whom they had so sorely wronged. The first rays of the rising sun brightened their trail toward the south. Like a promise. Like a benediction.

COWTOWN DAYS

A TRUE FEATURE

By JOHN WILEY

Few Men Could Keep The Lid On A Wild Cowtown As This Frontier Sheriff Did

No peace officer of the frontier ever had a tougher bunch of gun-fighting hombres to deal with than Martin De Prieste, sheriff of the Western Nebraska County of Keith, in which was located the cowtown of Ogallala.

Shot at many times and seriously wounded twice, Mart De Preiste went on for twelve years, through the blazing '70's and into the scarcely less torrid '80's, gathering in bad men and holding the lid reasonably tight on a town that yielded nothing to Dodge City or Abilene when it came to wildness. Nearly always he brought in his man alive; he shot only as a last resort.

COWTOWN SHERIFF

Martin De Prieste, who, as sheriff of Ogallala, proved just as tough as the many gunmen who hit the famous trail town.

Ogallala, early in its youth, became a great cattle shipping center. Trails led to it from South and North—trails with good grass and water along the way. There was a ford at Ogallala which made it easy for the big herds from Texas to cross the South Platte without loss. At the height of the season the corrals at Bosler, just west of town, were filled with cattle being shipped by the trainload over the Union Pacific to Eastern markets.

Big herds were being held on both sides of the Platte, waiting their turn. In such times Ogallala was filled with a reckless floating population of cowboys, gamblers and habitués of saloons and dance-halls. When cattle were not being shipped, Ogallala was a mere sprawl of unpainted buildings, peopled by a handful and waiting for the first clatter of hoofs and discharge of revolvers to announce that the cowboys had come again.

Money was plentiful in Ogallala in cattle-shipping time. Cattle buyers bartered in gold for the herds which were trailed to this strange mart. Payment was made in

cash, perhaps in the corner of a saloon—the Crystal Palace, the Cowboys' Rest, the O. K., and other places along Railroad Street. Gambling and dancing might be going on at the very elbows of the bargainers. When a cattleman had sold his herd, he paid off his cowboys and then took his satchelful of gold out to his camp at the edge of town, unless he chose to let the gamblers have a try at some of it. But there were no holdups. Getting away through the cordon of cow camps surrounding Ogallala would have been difficult. Besides there was Mart De Prieste to reckon with.

De Prieste was a wiry little Texas cowman, a scant two inches over five feet in height. His shoulders were broad, and he was a catamount in a rough-and-tumble. He was a wonderful shot, but, most of all, he had the sort of nerve that enabled him to look fearlessly into a threatening gun-barrel and made an opponent think twice about shooting.

When De Prieste took office, bets were made that inside of three months he would be killed. It seemed a certainty that some desperado or drunken cowboy, crazed with the lust to kill, would "get" him. One of his closest calls was on a winter day when he got word that four horse thieves were making a getaway across the prairie after a successful raid. Horse thieves were numerous, and always they were desperate and well-armed. They would fight when cornered, knowing that if captured, a noose in the hands of cowboys would be likely to spell their fate.

The horse thieves had fled along the Platte. De Prieste took up the trail, alone. He always rode a roan horse that had been matched against the best in the cow outfits and had won many races. When De Prieste came within range of the horse thieves, bullets began to whine around him. It was evident that the men did not intend to surrender. De Prieste, waiting until he had come within closer range, fired and one of the men dropped out of his saddle, dead. Again the sheriff fired, and another of the horse thieves toppled over, fatally wounded.

One of the remaining fugitives threw back a shot that was lucky—for him. The heavy bullet crashed into De Prieste's arm and forced him to abandon the chase. His left elbow was always stiff after that encounter, but it made no difference in the little sheriff's quickness in handling firearms.

De Prieste's deputy was Joe Hughes, a buffalo hunter famous for the number of his kills when bison roamed the Western Nebraska plains. Hughes, like his chief, was a man of iron nerve, which he displayed in a battle with three desperadoes at the Ogallala railroad station. Word had come through that three men who were wanted for horse stealing and other crimes were on a freight train, due in Ogallala at a certain time of night. When the train came in, Hughes was at the station alone, the sheriff being away on another errand.

Three men, answering the description of the desperadoes, dropped off the train. Hughes' greeting, "Hands up," was met with three revolver shots. As coolly as if he were shooting for Thanksgiving turkeys, Hughes returned the fire. One of the men fell, but the others stood their ground and bullets whistled around the deputy. Again the former buffalo hunter fired, and another of his opponents dropped. This was too much for the morale of the third, who scuttled between freight cars and managed to make his escape. One of the victims of Hughes' accurate shooting had a bullet through the head—the other was shot through the heart. Nobody knew their identity and they were buried in Ogallala's Boot Hill.

Once in a while a cowboy would aspire to climb into the "bad man" class and, as a starter, would attempt to "shoot up" the

town. One of those worthies was emptying his revolvers in a way that endangered Ogallala's population, and he was approached by the sheriff in a remonstrative mood.

De Prieste's demand for the cowboy's gun was met by a shot, aimed full at the sheriff, who reeled against a building with a bad flesh wound in the leg. The cowboy wheeled his horse and dashed out of town, heading across the river, toward the cow camp from which he had come.

De Prieste, his face white from pain, limped to the hitching rack where his roan horse was standing. The cowboy reached camp safely, but saw De Prieste coming alone on his trail. The other cowboys, knowing De Prieste's prowess with the gun, would not back up their comrade. The cowboy, now thoroughly sobered, jumped on his horse and started a headlong flight across the prairie.

The little sheriff, on a better mount, gained steadily. The cowboy turned in his saddle and fired, but his shots went wild. De Prieste, when within good range, fired once and killed the cowboy's horse.

Flinging himself behind the dead horse as a breastwork, the cowboy took steady aim with his rifle at the advancing sheriff.

Here De Prieste showed the remarkable nerve that had gained him his sheriff's badge. Without attempting to fire again, he advanced steadily upon his opponent.

"Better put down that gun, cowboy," said the sheriff.

The cowboy tried to sight over the wobbling barrel of his rifle. He had every chance in the world to kill the advancing sheriff, but his nerve failed. When De Prieste was within ten feet of him, the cowboy threw down his rifle and stood up, his hands in the air.

When De Prieste got his prisoner back to Ogallala and ensconced in the shack that was used for a jail, the town was seething. Someone had suggested that anyone who would try to kill the sheriff should be lynched, and the idea had grown in favor—so much so that a crowd gathered, prepared to do the job.

De Prieste planted himself in front of the flimsy jail, revolvers in hand.

"I'll be on guard over this cowboy until the next train comes through for Kearney," he said, "and if anybody tries to rush me, I'll shoot to kill."

Under the sheriff's cool, incisive words, the mob spirit died almost as soon as it had flared up. De Prieste took his man to Kearney and saw that he went "over the road" for a long term. Such cases as were not settled without benefit of law in Ogallala went to Kearney, where Judge Gaslin held forth in the District Court. The judge was noted for his severity toward offenders who tried to impede the work of the peace officers in Western Nebraska.

In cattle-shipping season, when money was plentiful, Ogallala attracted the "big shot" gamblers and gun-fighters. Bat Masterson, Wild Bill Hickok, Luke Short, and others whose faces were familiar at the gaming tables of Dodge City, Leadville, Deadwood, Tombstone, and other cowtowns and mining camps, often came to Ogallala for a more or less protracted session of play. In addition, Ogallala had its own gambling fraternity, the members of which took no back seats when it came to gunplay. Any differences between these individuals were allowed to be settled per-

Tucker Takes Bill Thompson's Gun

sonally as "affairs of honor" without undue interference of the law. Such was Ogallala's code—very generally observed in the sprightly young towns of the frontier West.

Chief among the local gamblers was Bill Tucker, known as "Tuck." He had come into possession of the O. K. saloon by the card route. The O. K. had been owned by Bill Betts. Tuck and Betts played heavily one night, and Betts was a consistent loser. Before the night was over he had put up the O. K. and lost it. Tuck moved in the next day and his proprietorship lasted for years.

When Bill Thompson, said to have been the brother of the celebrated gun-fighting Ben Thompson, of San Antonio, concluded to make an extended stay in Ogallala, he mistakenly ran afoul of Tuck. Tucker was a rough-and-tumble fighter as well as a fast and nervy man with a gun. A man of huge frame, he was proud of his strength and never hesitated to engage in a fight because he was outnumbered. If business was a little dull in Ogallala, Tuck would array himself in a black suit, with frilled shirt-front and black sombrero, and would seek gaming tables elsewhere. His plunging proclivities were known at Julesburg, Sidney, North Platte, Cheyenne and Denver.

Tuck was loyal to his friends, which fact he demonstrated when Bill Phebius, who ran the Cowboys' Rest at Ogallala, got into an argument with one of the O. K. bartenders and beat that worthy into insensibility. The bartender telegraphed to Tucker, who was doing a little timely harvesting at Cheyenne. Tucker immediately forgot all thoughts of personal gain and started for Ogallala.

The news of Tuck's arrival was carried to Bill Phebius, who lost no time in vanishing through the back door of the Cowboys' Rest. Tucker burst through the front door, revolver in hand. There was a sudden rush of cowboys and gamblers for the street. Tucker paid no attention to the departing customers, nor to the bartender, who assumed a horizontal position behind the bar. Tucker proceeded to shoot up everything in the place—mirror, bottles, pictures of prize-fighters and Venuses, lamps and clock.

"That," said Tucker, as he surveyed the wreck, "will learn folks that they can't work my help over."

It remained for Bill Thompson to scorn this object lesson. Liquored up to a proper degree, Thompson visited the O. K. saloon and did to that place what Tuck had done to the Cowboys' Rest.

Tucker was out of town at the time. Again a summons was sent to him—this time at North Platte where he was overcoming the sales resistance of some excellent prospects. Considerably annoyed at the interruptions of his business excursions, Mr. Tucker again headed for Ogallala. Friends met him at the station.

"Thompson's got a shotgun and is waitin' for you to show up," was the information.

Tuck gave no evidence of being perturbed at the news.

"A man like that's got no business packin' a shotgun," he said. "I'll see what I can do about collectin' it."

Thompson and his shotgun were at the corner of Railroad and Spruce, the latter being Ogallala's one intersecting street, extending toward the river. Tucker, in his ministerial garb, with his shirt-front making a gleaming mark, was an excellent target as he advanced toward Thompson.

"Give up that gun, Thompson," said Tucker, as he came on.

All Thompson had to do was to raise the shotgun which reposed in the crook of his left arm, and, theoretically, everything should be over. But he lacked the willpower to make the first belligerent move. Tucker reached out and took the gun from Thompson's unresisting hands.

"I'll just take this over to the O. K.,"

said Tucker, "and if you need it, come and get it."

With which remark Tucker turned his back on Thompson and walked over to inspect the damage to his saloon.

Thompson realized that if he let matters stand as they were, he would be laughed out of Ogallala. Getting another gun—this time a rifle—he started for Tucker's saloon. Thinking better of a frontal attack, he walked around to the side, where there was a window commanding a view of the bar, behind which Tucker had taken his accustomed place.

On seeing Thompson at the window, with a rifle leveled, Tucker seized a revolver and fired. Tucker's half brother, not knowing at whom the shot was directed, struck the revolver upward and the bullet went wild.

Thompson fired his rifle at the same instant. The rifle bullet cut off one of Tuck's fingers. Disregarding the wound, Tucker seized the shotgun which he had taken from Thompson, and rushed to the front door. Thompson had just come around the corner of the building and was running down the street.

Tucker raised the shotgun and fired both barrels. The dust flew from Thompson's coat, and the fleeing gambler fell to the sidewalk.

It turned out that the gun had been loaded mostly with buckshot. Only three buckshot were found in Thompson's body —none in a fatal spot. Thompson, however, was clever enough to create the impression that his wounds were much more serious than they were in fact. The groaning man was carried upstairs in the Ogallala House. Thompson had been the aggressor and had rather overstepped all bounds, even for Ogallala. It was agreed that he should be kept under guard, after the doctor had left with the parting information that the gambler would live.

A tin horn gambler, known as "Piccadilly" because of his English antecedents, was put on guard over Thompson. Piccadilly always wore a frock coat and a bowler hat and was tolerated in the saloons and gambling houses because he never resented being made the butt of rough jokes.

For several nights Piccadilly in his frock coat kept vigil over the wounded gambler. Meantime word had been carried to Dodge City. A rescue party of Thompson's friends in Dodge was formed, headed by Bat Masterson.

Ogallala never knew exactly what happened. The fact remained that when Piccadilly was relieved by the day guard, Bill Thompson was gone from his bed of pain. Piccadilly was sound asleep in his chair, tilted against the wall. He said he had fallen asleep and had had pleasant dreams, but had heard nobody enter or leave the room. In the meantime, Thompson was being transported across the plains from Ogallala in a buckboard, drawn by a team of fast horses. He was taken to Dodge City, where he soon recovered from his wounds and departed for Texas. The one who cared the least about his cleverly-engineered escape was Bill Tucker, who bore no grudges when once a fight was over.

The Burning Of Ogallala

Sometimes the gamblers of Ogallala "threw in" together and showed a solid front against a common enemy. Occasionally a cow outfit, some of whose members considered that they had been cheated at the gaming tables, threatened to "shoot up" Ogallala in a spirit of revenge. In such cases the gamblers stood together in upholding the sheriff.

A Texas outfit, camped south of the

river, once sought revenge because of alleged crooked play. The foreman, known as "Braz," announced that he was going to ride through the town with his cowboys and make Ogallala "look different."

True to his threat, Braz at the head of a dozen cowboys, started across the river. They were faced on the Ogallala side by Bill Tucker and other gamblers, with revolvers in hand.

"Now you turn back," said Tucker to Braz, "and when you ford the river with your herd, don't do it at Ogallala."

Braz protested, but the gamblers were adamant.

"The sheriff's away, but we're here to do his work," was the ultimatum.

The cowboys retired, and when the herd was moved it meant that a new fording place had to be found several miles up the river.

When it was at the height of its career as a cowtown, Ogallala was swept by fire. Little could be done toward stopping the flames as they jumped from one frame structure to another. Much of the material from saloons and gambling places had been carried out of the path of the fire.

"No use tryin' to stop this thing," suggested a gambler, "so why not play out here while we've got good lights?"

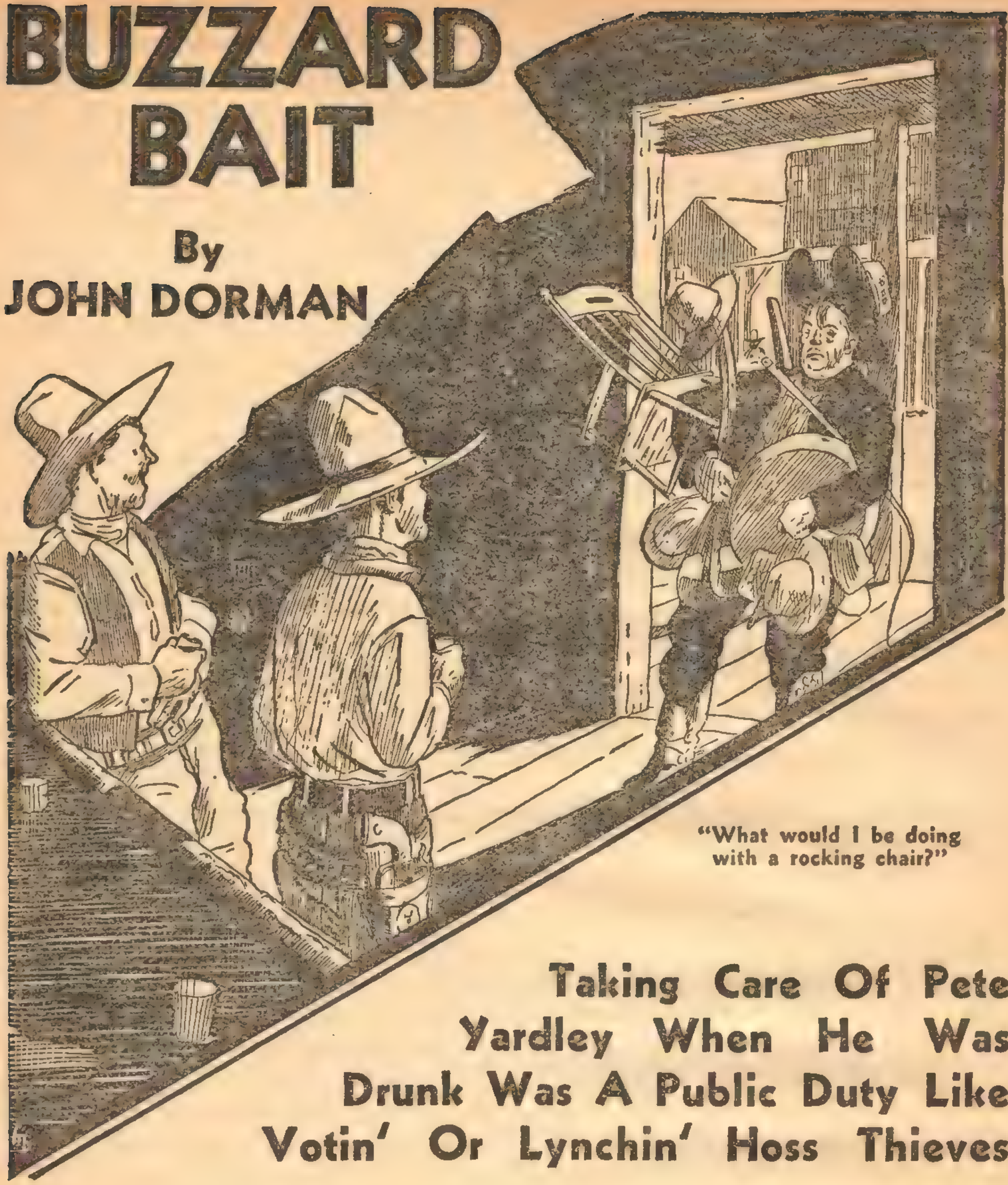
So the games went on outside, lighted by burning Ogallala.

The town was soon rebuilt. Nesters settled the adjoining lands, and Ogallala, like its frontier competitors, became respectable.

But this incident of the play going on while the town burned remains in the memory of many old-timers as typifying the Ogallala that was—a wild town, but game to the core!

BUZZARD BAIT

By
JOHN DORMAN



"What would I be doing with a rocking chair?"

Taking Care Of Pete Yardley When He Was Drunk Was A Public Duty Like Votin' Or Lynchin' Hoss Thieves

Len Forke and Smoky Joe Burton hit town in a cloud of dust, rolled off their cayuses at the livery stable door, and lit on the elevated board sidewalk plumb in the middle of Saturday night.

Len's blue eyes gleamed. He stretched the saddle kinks out of his six feet two, and shoved the black sombrero far back on his yellow hair.

This was something like it! Stores and saloons blazing with lights, hundreds of cow-country folks talking and laughing, pool balls clicking, and the smell of whisky and beer cutting right through the dust. Whoopee!

"God, Smoky," Len said, blissfully, "I sure got me an appetite for barroom licker, an' restaurant grub, an' human society that ain't got a mouthful of cowhair!"

Smoky's bacon-rind face beamed with the light of sheer happiness.

"Len, son, it sure looks good to a man that's been workin' three weeks on round-up with Eat-'em-Alive Pete Yardley an' his four-eyed, high-falutin' foreman!" Smoky said. "I tell yuh, I've knowed men with a talent for trouble. But Pete, he's a genius at it. I'm sure glad we're shet of him for a couple days."

Len grinned. Old Eat-'em-Alive was the best-intentioned man in West Texas, but he sure did have a gift for getting into difficulties. And when he got drunk, it took all of West Texas to handle him. One minute he'd be stealing things, and the next he'd be giving an outfit of dance hall girls a deed to the Methodist church.

"Hell, Smoky," Len said, comfortably, "you ain't been long in these parts, an' when you get to knowin' Pete better you won't mind helpin' take care of him. It's just kind of a public duty, like votin' an' lynchin' hoss-thieves."

"I'd ruther lynch hoss-thieves," Smoky said, dolefully.

Len stooped over, peering anxiously into Smoky's face. "My God, Smoky, yo're comin' down with Pete Yardley-itis! There ain't but one cure for it!"

He rushed Smoky through a pair of swinging doors, and draped him against a bar.

"Whisky!" Len gasped. The barkeep hustled out the bottle and glasses.

Smoky's face split sourly. He poured one drink down his dusty throat, blinked, and poured down another drink. The memory of Pete Yardley began to fade; peace came back into his tortured soul. Len relaxed, and picked up his own drink.

"Smoky," he said, "this is what a man keeps on workin' for. I tell—"

The swinging doors shuddered vaguely. Then in came a pot-bellied little hombre, full of liquor and dignity, and carrying a rocking chair, a wash tub, two hams, six Mexican straw sombreros and a buggy whip.

Smoky moaned. "Pete Yardley, fuller'n a tick, an 'takin' things! An' I thought he was home, sleepin' off yesterday's drunk!"

"My God, Smoky, let's get out-a here!"

But it was too late. Pete had his bulging eyes on them. He dropped his baggage, and came waddling ahead with the labored gait of an egg-bound duck.

"What in hell are you two doin' here?"

"Hello, Pete," Len said, feebly. "Dropped somethin', didn't yuh?"

Pete belched haughtily. "No, I didn't drop nothin'. What the hell would I be doin' with a rockin' chair? Now, what are you two doin' here?"

"Why," Len said, mildly, "that four-eyed nephew-foreman of yore'n give us a telegram to bring into town. Said we needn't come back 'til Monday mornin'."

"Yo're a liar!" Pete bellowed. "It don't take two men tuh carry one telegram! Besides, who the hell has my nephew got to telegram to?"

Smoky sashayed forward. "Len, that man called you a liar!"

"Haul in yore ears," Len growled, to Smoky. Then, to Pete, "He was telegraphin' to some hombre down in Mexico. I disremember—"

Pete howled. "Don't give me none uh yore lip! Yo're fired, both uh yuh!"

Smoky made a funny noise, and Len grabbed him. Pete staggered to the bar, picked up the bottle Len and Smoky had been drinking from, tasted the whisky, grimaced, heaved the bottle through a window and waddled out, kicking the wash tub as he passed it.

"Len, let me at him!" Smoky sobbed, twisting and clawing. "He can't fire us! Hell, we ain't workin' for him! Yore daddy just lent us to him for a couple weeks! Lemme go, Len! No man I ain't workin' for is goin' to fire me!"

"Ca'm down," Len growled. "I know how you feel, but what the hell you goin'

to do about it? Pete's a real nice guy when he's sober.'

"I wouldn't know about that," Smoky said, sourly. "I ai 't been acquainted with him but six months."

He pushed away from Len and wheeled to the bar. Len stood there thoughtfully, rolling a cigarette.

"Say, Smoky," Len said, five minutes later, "it was funny, four-eyes lettin' two of us go to town for two days, right in a beef round up. Looks like he wanted to get rid of us."

Smoky growled wordlessly, and Len turned to the barkeep. "Bill, yo're a friend of Pete's. Does he still give that nephew-foreman of his a bill of sale for all his critters 'fore startin' off on a spree, to keep hisse'f from sellin' 'em for nothin'?"

"Sure," the bartender said, easily. "But I wouldn't let it worry me none. I don't trust that nephew any more'n I do any other educated gent, but he couldn't sell them cattle if he wanted to. There ain't a man in Texas that'd buy 'em. If somebody did buy 'em, he'd get hisse'f lynched, an' the courts'd declare the sale null an' void."

Len stood there soberly for five minutes. Then he grabbed Smoky's arm. "Say, what the hell's in that telegram to Mexico?"

"It jest reads, 'Comin'," Smoky answered.

Len straightened and yelled, "I see it, Smoky! I see it! You pour another drink into yorese'f! We're goin' to ride!"

Smoky's jaw gaped. "You mean—"

Len's eyes gleamed. "I mean they's two thousand head of Pete's beefers rounded up, ready for drivin'—an' Four-eyes has got a bill of sale for 'em! He couldn't sell them critters in Texas, but he sure as hell could in Mexico!

"Pete's gone; you an' me's gone. Every dam man of them eight riders on the Hip Y is a bosom friend of Four-eyes'. It ain't but 40 miles from the Hip Y to the Rio Grande. The road's wide open to Mexico —an' Four-eyes is sendin' wires!"

Smoky shook his head, sadly. "Len, yo're crazy. Ain't he, Bill?"

"Crazier'n a loon," the bartender agreed.

"Yeah?" Len snarled, gulping a last shot of whisky. "Well, crazy or not, I'm on my way!"

"Alone?" Smoky gasped.

Len, whirling toward the door, growled, "Hell, they ain't but nine of 'em!"

He Stepped Past Lee's Body And Took Two .30-30's From The Rack

"Shucks," Smoky said, "so they ain't. An' not a dam man of 'em more than ten feet high, either. C'mon, Len, let's get goin'!"

Len plunged through the swinging doors; Smoky plunged after him. They got fresh horses at the livery stable, threw their hulls onto them, and left town in a bigger cloud of dust than they'd raised coming in. The big dipper said nine o'clock.

"Len, boy," Smoky said, dismally, after an hour of riding, "jokin' aside, we ought-a have some help. Them boys of Four-eyes' ain't real peaceful-like."

"Sure we ought-a have help," Len agreed, "but it would-a took us five-six hours to persuade the boys in town we wa'n't crazy. By then, it'd be too dam' late. Besides, we never would live it down if we dragged a posse out to the Hip-Y an' found everything all right an' on the level."

They rode on silently. The curtains of mesquite and chaparral flanking the road rolled steadily by. The coyotes yipped,

and big orange cow-eyes glowed out of the darkness as critters jumped up, startled by pounding hoofs.

The big dipper said midnight when they swung onto the trampled bed ground where Pete's Hip Y critters should have been.

"Gone, by God!" Smoky said, hollowly.

Len swung from his lathered horse, striking match after match as he studied the ground. His eyes gleamed as he straightened and lighted a cigarette.

"Gone sure as hell," he agreed. "An' the freshest sign is twelve hours old, at least. They was drove off, too; they didn't stampede. C'mon, Smoky, we need fresh hosses an' rifles. An' we better hustle that Chink cook of Pete's over to the Bar-Ten spread, an' the Broken Heart, to get us some help."

He remounted, and they rode the five miles to the Hip Y spread at a steady lope. Arriving there, Smoky went to the corrals for horses; Len went into the ranch house to find Johnnie Lee. He found him, at last, in Pete's office, sprawled out in front of the little iron safe, a cleaver in his hand and a bullet hole in his neck. The safe was open, but it wasn't banged up any; whoever opened it knew the combination.

Len stopped, shocked. Johnnie Lee was a good Chink, and a wonderful good cook. And he'd sure enough died fighting; a man to have guts to match a cleaver against a gun.

Then Len stepped past Lee's body, and took two .30-30 rifles from the rack, tried their actions, and crammed boxes of cartridges into his pockets. Smoky came in, growling something about horses being ready, then stopped dead short, seeing Johnnie Lee's body, and gasped:

"Say, that's hell! I sure liked that Chink, Len! An' they beefed him, didn't they?"

"Didn't miss," Len said, grimly. "An' Pete's goin' to hate losin' Lee worse'n losin' his critters. Lee's been with him twenty years."

Smoky nodded savagely. "Four-eyes had the combination to that safe, Len. It was him shot Lee, or else that hawk-nosed side-kick of his, Mac Colter."

"Colter, more'n likely," Len said. "Four-eyes ain't much with a gun."

Len found a blanket, and as he was spreading it over Lee's body, Smoky said:

"Up to us now, ain't it? Don't reckon we'll be gettin' no help."

"Can't ride for none," Len agreed. "It'd be twenty miles out-a the way, an' we ain't got time. It's past one o'clock now, broad day at five—an' 40 miles to the river. Best we can do is to leave a note pinned to the door, in case somebody comes along."

He dug out a pencil and paper, and scrawled:

> Four-eyed Ed Landry is rustling off Pete Yardley's critters to Mexico. Smoky Joe Burton and me will head 'em and hold 'em as long as we can. Len Forke.

He pinned the note to the door, then picked up the lamp he had lighted and headed for the kitchen, to lay in a grub supply. He shoveled some boiled beef and some baked beans into a tin bucket, wrapped four loaves of bread in a flour-sacking dish towel, and poured a pound or so of ground coffee into a paper sack. Smoky found and broke in two a dried apple pie, giving half to Len.

"Eat 'er, son," he sighed, contentedly. "It'd do the Chink good to know his pie's a-givin' us strength. An' I hate to think of dyin' cold an' hungry."

Len grinned around the pie. "You thinkin' of dyin', Smoky?"

"If we don't," Smoky said, dolefully, "we're sure overlookin' a real good chance."

Through with the pie, Len stowed the grub into a gunny sack, gave it to Smoky, then picked up and lighted a lantern.

Outside, they mounted silently, and got

going. In ten minutes they cut the trail of the Hip Y herd, heading straight for Mexico, turned down it and rode at a steady lope.

Dawn was cracking the west when they drew rein on a barren rise, ten miles from the Rio Grande. Down in the purple dusk below them cows mooed and snorted, and a man with a husky falsetto voice was droning La Cucaracha.

"That's them," Smoky growled. "That hombre singin' is Butch Patterson."

Len's eyes gleamed. "Smoky, you an' me'd better make us some plans. Now, we could tie into them hombres, or we could stampede them critters. But both of them propositions is plumb unlikely."

"Sure are," Smoky agreed. "Hell, Len, what we want to do is get some place where we can salivate them boys plentiful, without takin' too much back talk."

"Yup," Len said, smiling. "An' right down at Reefer's Crossin' would be the place, Smoky. The way the land lays there we could just dig ourse'ves in, right at the water's edge, an' they'd have to come within fifty yards of us to get to the river. An' they're headin' for Reefer's; ain't no possible doubt of it."

"All that listens good," Smoky said, "providin' there ain't no chance of them just comin' down an' takin' a look at us, then lightin' a shuck for some other crossin'."

"Nary chance," Len answered. "They'll argue with us quite a spell b'fore they go somewhere else. The next nearest crossin' is twenty miles from Reefer's, over dam rough country for cattle drivin'."

Smoky straightened his wiry little frame, rising in his stirrups. "Well, son, what the hell are we waitin' for? I'm ga'ntin' up fast, an' I'd like to get sot an' breakfast et b'fore Four-eyes comes along."

Len grinned, lifting his reins. They swung wide of the herd, and by broad day were back again on the Reefer's Crossing trail, pounding along at an easy lope.

An hour later they sighted the river across a barren, gently sloping plain a half mile wide. The Rio Grande there ran due north and south, and was nearly three hundred yards wide, but so shallow and sluggish that cattle could wade the entire distance except for a narrow channel near the Mexican shore.

The bank on the American side rose boldly twenty feet or more above the water, except right at the ford, where traveling cattle and rain had cut deeply into it over a stretch a hundred yards wide, making a steep approach down to the river.

Len drew rein at the top of this approach, grinning at Smoky:

"This'd be where Gineral Len Forke Custer recommends makin' his last stand, Smoky—right at the top of this here pitch down to the water. We could dig us a little fort, an' get sot to hold it."

"Sure could," Smoky agreed. "An' I sure feel bad about them boys havin' to ride across all that open space to dispossess us. It ain't goin' to be healthy."

"I'd be scairt to try it," Len said, candidly.

He dismounted, stretched the kinks out of his long body, and got to work. Rain had bored a pocket in the clay at the top of the approach, and not far from the middle of it. Using his knife for a pick, Len began rounding out and enlarging the pocket, piling the loose dirt around the edges. Smoky dragged up a log and two poles from the river, adding them to the fortifications.

In two hours they had a comfortable dugout about four feet square and almost as deep, and finished the job by making the place look just like a natural little mound. Smoky led the horses away to concealment on a narrow bar at the water's edge, under the bank. Len emptied the meat and beans out of the bucket and made coffee.

Hunkered down near the dugout, they

started work on the victuals, passing the pail of coffee back and forth between them.

"Leonard," Smoky sighed, at last, "there sure ain't nothin' that'll ever take the place of groceries."

Len yawned. "I could do with a little sleep, myse'f," he said. "An' we might as well sleep, turn an' turn about, 'til Four-eyes shows up. You kin take first go; yo're older'n me, an' need yore rest."

Smoky didn't argue. He stretched out and began snoring. Len puttered around getting water and cartridges handy in the little fort, and stowing the grub away. It was about eleven by the sun when Len woke Smoky up and lay down himself. But he hadn't more than dozed off before Smoky began prodding him.

"Len, get up! Company comin'!"

Len blinked, got a good look at the sickly gray color of Smoky's face, and jerked himself awake. Company was coming sure enough; two men riding down the trail.

They crawled into their hole, and Len lifted his field glasses.

"Four-eyes hisse'f, an' his pal Colter," he announced, presently.

"Len, son," Smoky gulped, apologetically, "you best talk to 'em. I kind-a got buck-ague; I ain't goin' to be no good until I r'ar up an' beef somebody."

"I'll talk to 'em," Len said, grimly. His throat tightened. Right now nine men seemed a lot more than it had back in town.

Four-eyes and Colter came loping along, carefree and unsuspecting. Len waited until they were only twenty yards distant. Then suddenly he straightened up, rifle ready.

Four-eyes and Colter stopped like they'd hit a fence, their jaws gaping. Smoky guffawed, and Len grinned, but neither of them said a word.

The sweat stood out in big beads on Four-eyes' round face. Finally he couldn't stand the silence any longer. He licked his lips, and yelped:

"You can't stop us! We've got a bill of sale for them cattle!"

"Yeah?" Len said, easily. "An' maybe you've got a pardon from the governor for the gent that shot Johnnie Lee?"

Colter stiffened, slit-eyed. Four-eyes swallowed hard, and said, "Listen, Len, that was Lee's own dam fault. We wasn't robbing that safe. Hell, Pete never kept anything in there but his liquor. But I had money in it. Lee started making trouble, and one of the boys just had to shoot him."

"Sure," Len said politely. "An' that same boy's just got to hang."

Again there was sweating silence, until Smoky cut into it.

"Hell, Len, we're wastin' time. It was one of them two. Let's jest shoot 'em both, an' we'll be sure of gettin' the right man."

"Say," Len said, admiringly, "that's an idea! You take yore pick, Smoky."

Colter turned white, and Four-eyes green. They knew that, given provocation, Len and Smoky were just as flip with hot lead as with words.

"You kin shoot Four-eyes," Smoky said, generously. "This is yore party, Len, an' I want you should have some fun out of it. I'll shoot Colter."

Four-eyes' nerve broke; he wilted, yelping frantically. "I didn't shoot that Chink! I swear to God I didn't! I didn't want him shot!"

"So it was Colter, huh?" Len snapped, viciously.

"Yes!" Four-eyes howled. "It was Colter! He—"

Colter snarled, whirling to Four-eyes, and his hand flashed to his gun.

Len and smoky fired together. Colter screamed, and sagged slowly from the saddle, the hogleg dropping unfired from his shaky hand. Four-eyes grabbed for the sky as Len and Smoky levered in fresh

shells. He was bogged right down in misery and terror; his lifted hands fluttered.

"That'll square things for old Lee," Len said, evenly. "Now, Four-eyes, get off'n that hoss an' walk up here. An' don't make no sudden moves."

Four-eyes gathered that he wasn't going to be killed immediately. He dismounted, and wobbled toward the dugout. He was an oldish-looking young hombre, and built like his uncle, bigger around the waist than anywhere else.

"Set down!" Len barked.

Four-eyes dropped like he was shot. Len grinned, and kept him covered while Smoky got his gunbelt and also Colter's weapon.

"Hey Len," Smoky yelped, suddenly, "them cows is comin'!"

The Hip Y herd was scattered out along the far edge of the sloping plain. And the nearest point man was barely a quarter of a mile away; apparently he'd heard the shooting, and was riding ahead to investigate. In a moment he wheeled abruptly, waving his arms. The riders began holding the herd.

Len cursed. That point man had had his field glasses out, and had seen enough. And Len had been hoping to trap another man or two as he had the first pair.

For nearly a half hour Len watched the riders and the herd, half expecting some show of hostility. But there wasn't any; Four-eyes' men contented themselves with keeping the herd bunched up, back out of rifle range.

"Them boys is worse scairt than we are, Smoky," Len said at last, relaxing and rolling a cigarette. "Suppose'n you rustle up some grub, while I do us some thinkin'."

Four-eyes licked his lips, swallowed a couple times, and said, heavily:

"I'll give you boys five thousand dollars apiece to let my drive through."

"That's a heap of dinero, Smoky," Len said, admiringly.

"Hell," Smoky answered, dismally, "you can't use five thousand dollars for money, Len. You gotta put it into buyin' you a home, or somethin'. An' I ain't goin' to be saddled down with no such responsibility. Just lookin' after you an' Pete Yardley takes all the strength I got."

Len grinned, then said, "Guess we can't deal with you, Four-eyes."

Four-eyes started up, snarling; he never could stand being kidded.

"Say, what the hell are you two getting out of this, anyway?"

"Why," Smoky said, peering into the pail of boiling coffee, "we ain't gettin' nothin', Four-eyes. We're just actin' in behalf of West Texas, a-takin' care of Pete Yardley. It's a kind of public duty, like votin' or lynchin' hoss thieves. Len'll explain it to you. I don't understand it so good myse'f."

Four-eyes gave it up, then. His mouth shut grimly, and he sagged back.

Len and Smoky wolfed down their victuals, gave the leavings to Four-eyes, and then Smoky stretched out for another nap. Len went on with his thinking. Four-eyes' seven riders did nothing but keep the herd bunched up. Len decided they were waiting for darkness, figuring to sneak up on him and Smoky then, get them out of the way, and drive the cattle after nightfall.

Time dragged on. The sun crossed the river, and started down the other side of the sky. Len studied the sun, the river, the cattle. It was four o'clock when he barked:

"Four-eyes! The best way out-a this for all of us is for you to take them critters right back where you got 'em from. Pete won't jail you; can't, very well. If I let you go, will you do it?"

Four-eyes stiffened eagerly. Smoky blinked awake, and sat up.

"Lord, yes!" Four-eyes cried.

Len grunted. "Well, get goin'."

Four-eyes was flabbergasted. He got up, fumbled with his hat, stamped a sleeping foot, then hobbled toward his horse.

He mounted uncertainly, and jogged off, keeping his eyes fearfully over his shoulder. Suddenly he shot home his spurs.

Smoky gasped, "Len, are you crazy? He ain't goin' to take them cows home!"

"Reckon not," Len grinned. "Never did figure on it, Smoky. But come night, them boys'll have the hump on us. I'm just givin' 'em a chance to start somethin' in daylight. I've got a hunch they'll take it; they're honin' to cross that river."

Smoky nodded. The sweat was dripping from his chin. He and Len watched silently as Four-eyes galloped up to the herd and with a wave of his arm called his riders in for a conference.

The men loped out before the herd gathered in a knot, and stayed that way thirty minutes. Len and Smoky waited tensely, rolling and burning cigarettes. Suddenly the conference ended. Men galloped away, yelling, waving hats, swinging flat loops against the flanks of cows.

Smoky stared a moment; then his jaw gaped. "Len, they're goin' to stampede them cattle right over us, an' cross the river!"

"They're goin' to *try* that," Len conceded, grimly. "I figured they would. It was either that, or charge us themse'ves."

"Well," Smoky growled, hollowly, "that'll give us somethin' to brag about—providin' we live through it!"

They laid their four six-guns in a row on the parapet; lifted their rifles.

The herd was coming at a shambling trot. Then a roan steer shot out of the mass, heading for the river. Yelling riders urged other cows to follow him; in a moment more the leaders were less than a quarter mile distant, and beginning to run.

"Hold yore fire," Len said. "We'll split 'em around us."

Now the herd was coming hell bent for election, straight down the trail toward that steep approach to the river. The point men began dropping back, crouching behind their horses' necks. The swing men whooped it up, yelling and shooting.

The cattle came like a white-flecked avalanche. Riders swung low on their horses, out at the sides. The leaders were three hundred yards distant, two hundred. Grimly Len and Smoky waited. The cows plunged on, horns clashing, the ground trembling under them. A hundred yards, fifty, twenty-five.

"Give 'em hell!" Len yelled.

They leaped up, firing straight ahead into the sea of white cow faces. Cattle shut off all sight of Four-eyes and his men.

The rifles cracked as fast they could lever in shells. Cows shied away from the spitting jets of smoke; cows dropped, rolled over. A bellowing steer leaped straight over the dugout, blotting out the sky.

They emptied their rifles; still the herd came on. Len and Smoky stood now in a narrow lane between two galloping walls of maddened cattle. Eight or ten cows littered the ground before them, lying limp as rags, or twitching and rolling.

They grabbed hoglegs, and went on with the work. Every shot dropped a critter. The bulwark of dead and dying cows grew higher—but still not high enough. Len emptied his own gun, flung Four-eyes' gun into his right hand with the border shift.

The hammer of that gun clicked twice on empty shells. Len threw it into a bawling white face, then dropped low into the dugout, to take what might come. Smoky fired his last shot, and crouched beside him. Twice leaping cows came out the sun. Then the thunder of hoofs died.

The cattle were almost all in the river, now, forging along in the shallows. And three men were with them, out in the stream—Four-eyes, Butch Patterson and a scrawny ex-jockey named Ruppert. Northward up the bank, a quarter mile away, the other five were looking for a way down into the river. They were out of range, but the three in the water were less than two hundred yards away.

Len scowled, then suddenly grinned. "Smoky, them five was supposed to mop up on us after the herd went through, an' lost their nerve. But the three in the river don't know it yet, an' they're too busy to find out otherwise."

Smoky growled, and swung up his rifle. Len knocked it aside.

"No sense wastin' lead on dyin' men, Smoky."

Smoky's jaw gaped. "Dyin' men? My God, Len, in ten more minutes them three boy'll have the herd across the river, an' in Mexico!"

Len's eyes gleamed. "In ten more minutes them boys'll be fightin' for their lives, with all hell to pay an' no pitch hot! Watch this, Smoky! There'll be buzzard bait on the sand bars t'morrow!"

Smoky stared unbelievingly, then shrugged, and turned to the herd, wading slowly along with the old roan steer still leading the way. On they went. Fifty yards from the Mexican side, the roan steer dropped into the swimming channel, stretched his head out—and the sun, an hour or so from setting, struck squarely in his eyes.

He bawled, and swung around, with Ruppert trying vainly to head him.

The steer faced a solid mass of cattle. He swam right at them, reared up, trying to make for shore over their backs, then went down under their plunging hoofs. Four-eyes, Ruppert and Patterson drove into the mob, trying to keep the leaders from turning back. They were yelling, shooting, slashing with quirts. Fifty or more bawling cattle, smarting under the quirts, lunged past the riders into the channel, and swam a stroke or two. One by one they got the sun in their eyes, went crazy, and swung back, churning water desperately.

"Good God!" Smoky gasped, palely. "Good God!" Suddenly he knew what few cow pokes nowadays have a chance to learn, and what Len knew because of a trail-driving grandfather—no man can make cows swim against the glare of an evening sun.

The swimming cows, heading back for the American shore, hurled their frenzied strength against the solid wall of cows pushing on from the shallows. The dreadful swimming mill began, with the three riders caught in the midst of it, horns and heads heaving up in the desperate turmoil around them.

A steer heaved himself up on Four-eyes' horse. Four-eyes beat at the white face with a six-gun; then he and the horse went down, and the gap they had filled was instantly closed. Ruppert and Patterson were fighting to get out.

Patterson made it, and struck out for Mexico. Ruppert was engulfed.

For a long time the milling went on, and that moaning sound continued. Then at last critters in the shallows stopped pressing forward, and began to give ground. Cows by the channel found bottom under their feet, and lost their panic. Slowly the turmoil subsided; the herd moved back to the American shore.

Cow bodies began to heave up from bottom and drift away in the bloodied froth of the river. Circling waves sloshed gently on the bank, then were gone. And across the river, five riders swung in to join Patterson as his horse hauled out on shore, then all six lit a shuck for parts unknown in Mexico.

Len laughed, softly, eyes gleaming with satisfaction.

"She's all over but the shoutin', Smoky. Yippee-e-e-e!"

"Yeah," he snarled. "She's all over! All but us stayin' here two-three days, doin' ten men's work a-watchin' that herd, until Pete Yardley comes along to help us! An' us with nothin' but unsalted cow meat to live on, in the meantime!

"If yuh ask me, I'd a hell of a lot ruther lynch hoss thieves!"

The Cactus City Department

VOL. 15 No. 45

CHRISTOPHER COLUMBUS, GEORGE WASHINGTON, KIT CARSON ARRIVE IN CACTUS CITY

Beefsteak Bevans Skeptical

Last Tuesday night Cactus City sure got itself distinguished. It entertained some very famous people, the likes of which probably never visited one town in one night before. Among these here distinguished folks was Kit Carson, George Washington and Christopher Columbus.

Of course, there will be some smart hombres who will sneer and say it ain't so, but I guess they would have been convinced if they'd been present and heard Christopher Columbus hisself say that Cactus City is a very fine little town and he only wished he could stay longer. (That just goes to show that Columbus was a wise gent, and not lucky like some claim.)

Now, let me explain that those famous people I mentioned wasn't here in person. That is, not in the flesh and in the blood. No, it was their spirits which was a-visiting, and that's the same thing, practically.

All the credit for having these here distinguished guests in Cactus City will have to be gave to Madame La Hokus, the famous Spiritulist and Ghost Caller. She managed to bring those gents as special guests at a Public Say-ants which she pulled off in the Plaza last Tuesday night.

There was a big crowd present, most of them kind of suspicious about this Spirit busines. But Madame

(*page 2, col. 3*)

LOCAL RESIDENT ET BY BEAR

Accident Feared

Ole Larson is looking for a man to help him with the milking at his milk-cow ranch. The cow-juicer he had went bear hunting a few days ago, and he ain't come back. Ole says he can't understand this, as the gent was always a steady sort and not the kind to pull out without notice. At first, Ole thought the milker was just lost, so he trailed him but couldn't locate him. Ole found his shoes and his clothes, which was all tore to hell. Also he found the gent's gun and some bear tracks, but he didn't find no sign of the milker hisself. "It's mighty mysterious," says Ole, after reflecting on the matter. "But of course there's always the chance that something might have happened to him."

SHERIFF MAD

NOTICE: I don't want to hear no more of this malicious slander and gossip which is being passed around town about me. People is saying that I ain't efficient, pointing out that I took all of one day to bring in the bandit which held up the Buckhorn Pool and Recreation Parlor.

The reason I took all day at that chore was to save the town some money. After I had captured that bandit, which I did right pronto, I couldn't just shoot him down in cold blood, could I? And if I brought him in alive, we would have to give him a fair and legal trial at public expense. So instead of that, I spent the whole day fooling him around until the bandit got up his nerve to try and escape, so I could shoot him down legal.

(Signed) Sheriff Banning.

RESTAURANT MAN SHOOTS CUSTOMER

Stew Was Cause

Sometimes a very simple question is liable to turn out to be plumb embarrassing to the hombre it is asked of. Like the question which Delirium Deabill asked of Eddie of Eddie's Café.

(Maybe Eddie won't appreciate having this story come out in print, but it is the honest truth and it is my duty to report all happenings without fear and favor. Besides, if Eddie wouldn't serve grub that would make a buzzard unsteady in the stomach, why such stories as this wouldn't have to be told.)

Anyways, late the other night Delirium went into Eddie's Café for a bite to eat. As usual, Delirium was full of red-eye and beer and other miscellaneous likker. He was feel'ng right poorly in general, and in particular his eyes was bleary and his brain was foggy and his stomach was sort of touchy. He ordered a plate of stew from Eddie, and while Eddie was dishing it up, why Delirium plopped his head on the counter and dozed off

Eddie had to shake him right severe and holler real loud to rouse him. And when finally Delirium did get his head up and his eyes open, he took one look at the plate of stew and asks, "Shay, am I shupposed to eat that shtew —or did I?"

PERSONAL

Mrs. Funnel Funderberg, widow of Funnel Funderberg who recently drank hisself to death, says that it is a dang lie and malicious gossip that Funnel left her no estate. He left, she says, dang near a full gallon.

EDITORIAL

Because it is about time for school to start commencing for the year, I guess it is up to the Gazette to speak a few words about the Value of Education. Some folks, who theirselfs is very ignorant, is trying to bring up their kids the same way, and not make them go to school.

Now, I know how you all feel about schooling. You say that a boy can't learn to ride and rope and shoot in school. Also that fillies don't learn nothing there about cooking and sewing and other household tasks. Well, that is very true, but you can't expect everybody to grow up useful, can you? For instance, there always has got to be politicians and preachers and other parasites. And you got to be able to read and write to be one of them, don't you? Of course! Also, how do you expect your boy to grow up to be President of the United States or a Newspaper Editor if he ain't able to read and write.

But even if you don't aim that high, why education ain't without its value. If you could read and figger, for instance, why when you get your bill from Short-weight Weston or Beefsteak Stevens, you could tell how much each of them had cheated you for the month.

Of course, you hammer heads will point out that the three richest men in the State is ignorant as hell, none of them being able to sign his name even with an X. Also you'll say that the most prosperous citizen of Cactus City, who is Jack-ass Jake of the Stud-horse Bar, never learned his trade in a school.

Well, those things are very true, but making money and living a life of ease is all they know how to do.

So let's see all you folks with a family get your brats to school this year. What do you think us taxpayers built that very pretty school house for, as well as paying teachers' salaries? Also if your kids grow up without learning to read, who in hell will read the Gazette?

SHEEP (LESS) HERDER

Half-wit Wimmer's boy, Quarter-wit, didn't last very long as a sheepherder, although everybody thought he had just the proper amount of brains for such. A couple of weeks ago Baa-baa Borel gave the kid a chance to learn the business and sent him out on the range with a flock of the woolly stinkers. Then about ten days later Quarter-wit shows up at headquarters.

"What's the matter?" inquired Baa-baa. "Did you run out of grub?"

"Naw."

"Well, don't you like the job? Is everything all right?"

"Sure! Fine!" answers the kid.

"Then why ain't you out on the range lookin' after your sheep?" Baa-baa demands. "What the hell are you doin' here at headquarters?"

"Well, I didn't want to be drawin' wages without earnin' 'em," Quarter-wit explains. "I thought I'd come in and tell you that if you want me to keep on workin' for you, why you better give me another flock of sheep. That other bunch strayed away the very first day."

PERSONAL

Calico Connors, out to the Six Point Shooting Star and Crescent Dude Ranch, says that the dudes who is hunting out there this year is either a whole lot smarter than usual or else they are lazier. So far this year, he reports, the fatalities has been only .16 horses and 21 cows, not to mention 5 or 6 of the dudes who also has been killed accidental.

—

Most citizens think that Deadwood Dean, who cashed his chips recently, died of gunshot wounds. But in the Official Death Book for Cactus County, the Coroner has got it marked down that Deadwood died account of being overweight. He failed to say that the extra weight was caused by .45 slugs. I guess that is just a unimportant detail.

(*from page* 1)

pretty quick convinced them. After much moaning and wailing, like a Injun squaw at a death dance, the Madame announced that a connection was made with the Hereafter. Then to prove it, she whistled up the spirits of Kit Carson, Columbus, and etc., just like I said. Each of those gents made a little speech, all in a mournful voice, just to assure the folks that this spirit busines is no fake.

After that, Madame asked if there was anybody present in the crowd who would like to talk to a Dear Departed. Right off, Beefsteak Stevens spoke up and asked Madame was the connection she had made with Heaven or with Hell. It don't make no difference, the Madame tells him, as a Spirit is a Spirit whether it's carrying horns or a harp.

"Well, then," says Beefsteak, "I'd sure admire to have a few words with Dogleg Doolin. That son-of-a-gun died owin' me four bits!"

Now, that seemed like a common-sense request, but La Hokus gets downright huffy about it, saying that it ain't right to bring up money matters at a say-ants. (Madame herself waited until *after* the say-ants to take up a collection, for instance.)

The next request was from Mrs. Whitson, who asked will the Madame please bring up the spirit of her Dear Departed husband, Wagon-wheel Whitson. The Madame tried very hard to do this, but at last she had to announce that Wagon-wheel's spirit is very busy in a pinochle game with some other spirits and cannot be disturbed.

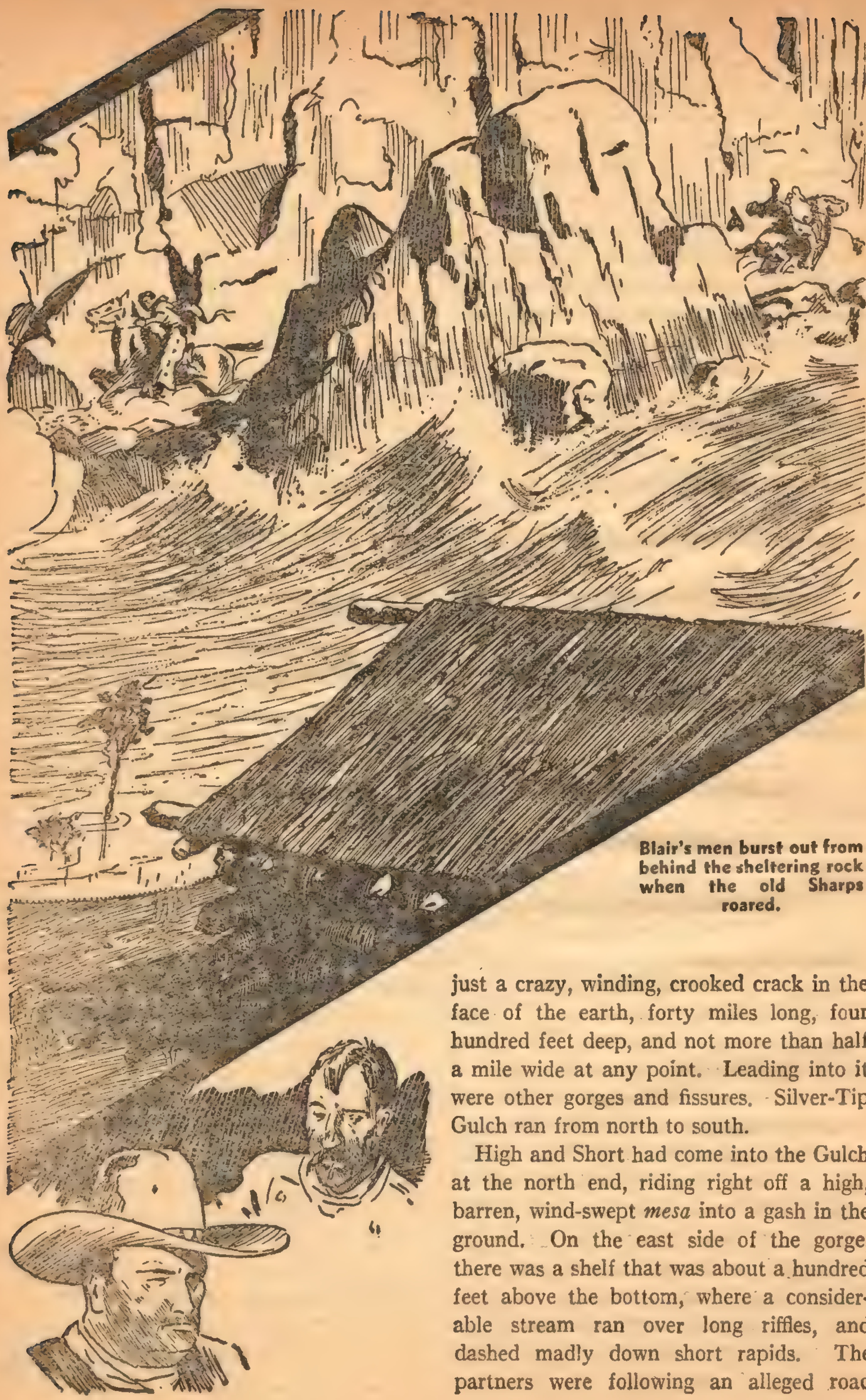
And if that ain't enough to convince you smart hombres that this Spirit business is on the square, I'll add a personal experience. After the Public Say-ants, I managed to get me a Private Say-ants with the Madame (for $5 cash), and I'm here to state that there *is* spirits, and that the Madame can sure whistle them up. I know, because one of those dang spirits got away with my watch.

SILVER-TIP GULCH

A "High" And "Short" Laugh Riot

By J. E. GRINSTEAD

It was called Silver-Tip Gulch because it had once been a favorite stamping-ground for grizzly bears. The grizzlies had either been killed, or had left the gulch, but there were worse things than grizzlies in those wild gorges. The Gulch was



Blair's men burst out from behind the sheltering rock when the old Sharps roared.

just a crazy, winding, crooked crack in the face of the earth, forty miles long, four hundred feet deep, and not more than half a mile wide at any point. Leading into it were other gorges and fissures. Silver-Tip Gulch ran from north to south.

High and Short had come into the Gulch at the north end, riding right off a high, barren, wind-swept *mesa* into a gash in the ground. On the east side of the gorge, there was a shelf that was about a hundred feet above the bottom, where a considerable stream ran over long riffles, and dashed madly down short rapids. The partners were following an alleged road

that ran along the shelf, far toward night, when High said:

"Short, do you know where we are at?"

"Yes," growled Short, "we are in Silver-Tip Gulch."

"Shore," grinned High, "but where are we at, in it? We been in it all day, and—" High broke off, as a deafening peal of thunder accompanied by a blinding flash of lightning, shook the mountains.

"If it gets any darker in here we'll lose the road," said Short.

"Lose the road, hell," jeered High. "It's already lost. It just drifts off in here, and can't find the way out. If we lose it, we won't lose much. I thought a dozen times today that we lost it, when it run into a hole, but it comes out again. What troubles me is that storm comin' down the gorge behind us. How much farther you reck'n it is to the mouth of the thing, and that Gillup City place we aim to go to?"

"I don't know," snapped Short. "It's at the mouth of the Gulch, and that's all I know. We ain't saw a house nor a human since we rides into this trail to hell, so I ain't asked no questions. Looks like we orto—" Short stopped. Thunder was rolling right over their heads, and the inky cloud had simply folded down over the Gulch and blotted out everything. They couldn't see the uncertain road, which had showed wheel-tracks in soft places all along, making them wonder what sort of vehicles could follow it.

"Hold the deal," called High. "I see a light."

"Where's ary light?" growled Short.

"Right down there. Look. I see it again. Come on. I'm goin' to it. Maybe it's a house, and that cloud is goin' to dome something bad, pretty soon."

"Hold on, you dang fool," snapped Short. "If we go down there, we can't get back, and we'll lose the road."

"Keep the dang road, if you want it," jeered High. "I'm gone."

Short followed High, cursing him as he went. He couldn't see the little bow-legged ape, hunched up on his horse, but he could follow the sliding sound, and the rattle of rocks, as High plunged down the long slope.

They pulled up in a fairly level place, almost down at the stream. They could see very little, but they could see a spear of light, and the outline of a cabin against the murky sky. Just then a hail-stone about the size of a peach cracked High on the head.

"I'm goin' into that house," he announced, as he slid from his saddle. "Another jolt or two like that, and I can't go nowhere. Come on here."

Leaving their horses to do the best they could, they approached the door of the cabin, and called a halloo. There was no reply to their call. More hail-stones pattered on the board roof, and bounced off on the two drifters.

"Hey, you," called High, impatiently. "Open the door and let us in, before we gets kilt by them ice-rocks."

"Well, pull the string and come in," rasped a harsh voice inside the cabin.

High had seen a latch like that before. He felt about on the door until his hand touched a buckskin thong. He caught the string, gave it a jerk, and the door swung open, but—they didn't enter just then. A grim, raw-boned old giant, with drooping mustache and glinting blue eyes, stood in the middle of the floor with a long gun in each hand.

"Thought you'd slip up on me, did you?" the giant snarled. "Well, that can't be did."

"Better kick that dang side-winder away from yo' hoof, before it bites you," said High, calmly.

The giant dropped his eyes to see the snake, which was not there. When he looked up, he was looking into the muzzles of a pair of very purposeful-looking guns.

"Easy as she lays, pardner," growled

Old Short. "We ain't tryin' to slip up on nobody. All we want is to get under something until this storm is over. Put them irons in yo' pockets. We're comin' in."

They eased into the cabin and closed the door behind them, just as the storm turned loose its wrath. It seemed as if the great hail-stones would tear the roof to splinters. Nothing else could be heard. The old giant backed toward the fireplace, where a little fire was burning. He motioned his unwelcome guests to a couple of rickety chairs, while he sat down on a box, and regarded them by the dim light of a guttering candle, that had been placed in the neck of an empty bottle. The hail stopped as suddenly as it started. The first word spoken was when the Old Giant said:

"Now, that's over, which one of them gangs of stick-up men do you two gents belong to?"

"Guess again, pardner," grinned High. "We don't belong to any gang. We're just a coupla drifting cowhands, trying to make it into Gillup City."

"Oh, y'are?" growled the giant, in a tone of doubt. "I'm Neal Todd. Does that mean anything to you?"

"It shore don't," grinned High. "That is, it don't mean nothin' except that you are the gent that invites us into yo' house with a pair of cannons in our faces. How come?"

"Easy enough. If you never heard of Neal Todd, you maybe won't understand. Looks like I got right smart killin' to do. I've did some of it. I sot out to clean this Gulch, and two stick-up outfits has sent me word that they aim to get me. That's how come I opens the door cautious—or rather lets you open it, while I'm cautious. If you two hombres don't belong in here, where did you all come from?"

"Why, we comes up out of Texas with a herd of cattle for a Montana gent. We gets paid and starts back. We stops at a town and has some drinks. Then we—well, we left there sorty sudden, because one of gents we been playing around with wasn't right well, and—"

"I understand," said Neal Todd. "I been in places like them. So, you just drops out of sight in Silver-Tip Gulch, because you didn't think anybody would ever look here for you. Say you are from Texas?"

"Yep," leered High, "and we aim to get back there as soon as we can. This don't seem to be a right healthy country. Too many storms—and things."

"Put her there, pardner," said Mr. Todd. "I'm a Texan. Used to drive stage out of El Paso, until the dang railroads puts me out of a job. I might of knowed you was from Texas, soon as I seen yo' gunwork."

High and Short told Neal Todd their names, and also told him they were hungry. Food was prepared, and they ate. The hail was gone, but a steady downpour of rain was falling on the cabin roof, when they pushed back from the table and rolled smokes.

"If it rains this way all the way to the head of the Gulch, they's apt to be hell to pay," opined Neal Todd. "That crick gets wolf wild, when it rains a lot, and—"

"Open that door, before we knock it down," roared a voice just outside the cabin door. "We know you are in there. We heared you talkin' to yo'self, like a danged lost prospector."

"There's hell again," growled Old Neal Todd. "Them's the gents that I thought you was. Well, if I got it to do, I kin do it. If I can't handle 'em, I reck'n you gents will leg for me."

Old Neal Todd rose, and pulled the two old cannons, just as the latch broke, and the door crashed open. Three men showed dimly, just outside the door.

"I know ye, damn ye," snarled Todd. "You thought you could slip up on me, but it can't be did. Get the hell away

from here, before I drill some rivet-holes into you, to hold ye in hell when ye git thar. Think I don't know that you are some of Red Henley's killers, I reck'n?"

The reply to that was the roar of a shot. One of Neal Todd's guns had exploded, but that was not the only shot fired. One of the men outside had fired, and one of Neal's guns had gone from his hand. Before Mr. Todd could get his balance, and fire again, that gun outside roared once more. The old giant reared up, tottered back a step, and crashed to the floor.

"I got the old hellion that time," said a snarling voice outside the door. "He won't ever throw our game again."

HARD TO KILL

High and Short had risen, and were standing to one side of the door. It really was not their fight. Still, Neal Todd had said he guessed they would leg for him if he couldn't handle the company, and just now it looked as if he couldn't. Anyway, they had eaten salt with Mr. Todd, however tough he might be.

"Better throw another slug or two into the old devil's carcase," said a sneering voice outside the cabin. "He might come back, and we better get him good while we are at it. He—" The man didn't finish. A blinding storm of lead poured out that door. Two of the three men went down, and the third one went somewhere else, as fast as he could manage. Short slammed the door and fastened it. Then he stooped over the fallen body of Mr. Todd.

"Huh," he grunted, "he ain't hurt much. One of his hands is jarred, and skun some, and a slug plowed through his foretop. I don't see how in the hell a man standing on the ground could of shot that high. Must of thought Mr. Todd had already started to heaven, and was tryin' to get him on the wing."

"Short, you owl-eyed idiot. You and me ain't got no business here. Somebody is apt to hear that bombardment, and come to see who does it. Then you and me gets ketched here with more fresh meat on our hands than the laws of this settlement allows. I wouldn't wonder they's some lay-in' out there in the rain."

"I don't give a damn'," snapped Short. "This old gent feeds us, and he says he's from Texas. I aim to try to bring him back from the happy hunting ground, and ask him what luck he had on his hunt. He—"

"Hey," called Neal Todd, opening his queer blue eyes as he struggled to a sitting posture, "what the hell happened?"

"Nothing much," drawled Old Short. "One of them gents tried to scramble yo' brains, but he didn't know they was in a cast-iron box, so he just knocked you down with a bullet."

"One of 'em?" snapped Neal Todd. "One was all I seen. That's why I didn't open sooner." Mr. Todd was still a bit dazed, and rubbed the blue mark across his skull as if it had been a rather annoying mosquito bite. "Open the door, and let's see how many I got."

"Shore," chuckled High. "Anything to oblige a gent that takes us in out of the rain. You was makin' right smart smoke with them cannons of yo'n." Short opened the door, and Neal Todd ordered them to bring the candle. "Just a minute, pardner. A candle makes a pretty good shooting light, and them gents might not a-gone far enough yet."

"Gimme that candle," bellowed Neal Todd. "I done had fifty gun-fights with them yaller hellions, and they ain't never hit me yet—to do no good. When I shoot, I want to see if the game drapped."

Old Neal Todd stepped out the door, shielding the candle from the rain with one of his horny hands.

"That old geezer is as crazy as a locoed road-runner," High said, in a low tone.

"Some of them gents is going to— I knowed it." A gun had bellowed, up on the hillside. The bullet mushroomed against a rock, and skittered across a puddle of water, filling Neal Todd's eyes with water, and putting his candle out. He scrambled into the cabin and slammed the door behind him.

"I told you them yaller hounds couldn't hit nothin'," he chuckled. "I must been doin' some good gunwork. They's two gents out there that's shotten clean to ribbons, and—"

"You better load yo' guns again," grinned Short, as he struck a match and relighted the candle.

Old Neal Todd picked his guns up off the floor and looked at them, then he transferred his gaze to High and Short.

"Damn'fi ever done that much devilment with one cartridge before in my life, unless— Thanks, gents. I see what happens now. You boys legs for me—some."

"Well," chuckled High, "the gents didn't seem friendly to you. One of 'em said something about pokin' a few more slugs into you, and we didn't think it was fair, you bein' down and all."

"No, it shore weren't givin' me a even break," declared Neal Todd. "That's all I ask of any man, with shootin' irons. Bein' unfair thataway, we ought to got all of 'em. Gimme that candle. I'll go out there again, and when that gent shoots, maybe one of you can get him by the gunflash—if I don't."

"Now, see here, Mr. Todd," said High. "Ain't no use in that just plumb darin' a gent to pot you. He can't miss you, if—"

"If it's my time to go," finished Neal Todd. "I don't believe it is my time to go. I wouldn't be took away from Silver-Tip until I cleaned it, like I sot out to do."

With his left hand holding the candle well away from him, and a gun in his right hand, the old giant stepped out the door. Instantly, there was a crash. Two crashes, in fact. One gun flashed in the dark, not more than fifty feet from the door. In the same second, Neal Todd's gun roared. He passed the candle into the cabin, and said, quite calmly:

"Light this candle. I want to look at my game. I know I got it, because I heared it fall, and kick a time or two."

Silently, Short struck a match and lit the candle. Neal Todd took it and walked to where a man lay on the ground. He stooped over the body for a moment. When he straightened up, he had two guns in his hand.

"They Been Trying To Get Me For Five Years"

"Uh-huh," he growled, musingly. "Alec Splawn. One of Henley's gang. That's the third time he tried to get me. Reck'n he'll quit tryin' now."

Neal Todd turned back to where the other two men lay. He gathered up their guns, and carried the lot into the house, where he dropped them on the floor, saying:

"Them guns is sorty wet. I'll have to dry 'em and ile 'em before I put 'em up. If I don't they'll rust."

"What are you going to do with 'em?" asked High.

"With what? Oh, you mean the guns. Why, I'll put 'em in the box with the others. I got a whole passel of 'em that I takes off'n dead stick-up men. They are in that box, over in the corner."

A grinning glance passed between High and Short, and High asked:

"What are you going to do with the men?"

"I was just thinking about that," said Neal Todd. "If you gents will lend me a

hand, we'll dispose of them killers now. Old Silver-Tip is rearin', tonight. Listen to her roar. All we got to do is just sling them bodies into the creek, and they'll be forty miles from here, before morning."

"Aw, hell, pardner," said Short. "We can't do that. Humans ought not be treated like that, in no country."

"I know it," said Neal Todd, "but them ain't humans. Them's stick-up men, and they ain't got nothin' comin' to 'em. They been tryin' to pot me for five year now. If they did, they'd let the kiotys drag my bones all over the Gulch. Of course, if you gents don't want to dirty yo' hands with such trash, I can make shift to handle 'em alone. I have already handled some."

High and Short didn't want to seem ungrateful to their host. Besides that, they didn't want some inquisitive person, the sheriff perhaps, to come along and find three dead men in front of that cabin and them in it. So, they joined Mr. Todd in his unpleasant labor of tossing the three bodies into the roaring stream. Then High and Short began to look for their horses, and couldn't find them.

"Let 'em alone until daylight," advised Neal Todd. "A braunk has got right smart more sense than a man. They'll take care of themselves. We better get inside, out of this drizzle of rain, and see can we sleep some."

A shakedown was made on the floor for the two drifters, while Neal Todd betook himself to his dirty bunk against the wall. Soon all of them were asleep. When morning come, High and Short were awakened by the smell of broiling bacon and a steaming coffeepot. It was after breakfast that they went out to look for their horses. Neither of them could be found, and the rain had even washed their tracks out.

"On the trail to hell, and afoot," growled Short. Just then Neal Todd came up. "How far is it to this Gillup City place?"

"Huh? Oh, Gillup City. Why, just step out here about fifty foot, and you can see it. You can stand on the edge of the bluff and throw a rock clean over it."

The partners walked the few steps and looked over the bluff. Sure enough, there was a little town, in a saucer-like valley, far below them. It looked like a soiled chromo, through the mist of drizzling rain that was still falling. Old Neal Todd came up behind them and said:

"Ain't far to town from right here, if a feller wanted to fall into it, but it's two mile by the road. A feller couldn't get thar a-tall this morning. Old Silver-Tip is on a wild high-lonesome, and backwater forty foot deep in Smelter-Drain gulch, right this side of town. If them stick-up killers knowed it, they got me cut off from aid, succor, and ammunition, and they could come and take me, unless— I reck'n you gents would side me in a gun rukus?"

"Shore we would," grinned High, "but— I don't like to ask too many questions, and all like that. Special when a gent is as handy with his guns as what you are. Still, and all, I'd like to know what kind of ranch you are running, up here under the sky."

"Ranch, hell," snorted Neal Todd. "They ain't enough grass in forty mile of here to winter a one-eyed gander. This here is my residence, my homestead, my legal domicile. I have to live here, because I'm sheriff of Silver-Tip County, and a lot of dang surveyors finds out that Gillup City ain't in the county."

High and Short glanced at one another, and a smile wrinkled the corners of the sheriff's eyes.

"Don't be skeered of me," he grinned at them. "I understood that one, or maybe both of you, perforated some gent back in that town. That ain't in my county, and I ain't got jurisdiction. Anyway, I know that town, and they's more men to the acre that needs killin' there, than any place west of the Mississippi. Come on

to the cabin. It's goin' to rain some more. Dangdest country in the world. Rains as much here as it do anywhere on earth, but it does it all at once. Ain't rained for two year, and now it's goin' to ketch up."

High and Short were knocked dumb. They followed the old sheriff on to the cabin, entered, and mended the fire, while rain pattered monotonously on the roof.

STRANGE SHERIFF, STRANGE COUNTY

"Gents," said Sheriff Neal Todd, as he seated himself on the box, and stretched his long legs before the fire, "I notice you don't talk much since I told you I was the sheriff of Old Silver-Tip. As I told you, they ain't nothin' to dread from me. I'm the peaceablest man in this western country, unless I'm mistreated and riled. If I hadn't been riled some, I never would of took the sheriff's office."

"How long you been sheriff?" asked High.

"Just one year, come November," replied the sheriff.

"Must been right populous country when you taken the office," grinned High, "or they wouldn't be any people left, according to the way you worked on them gents last night."

"It was right populous when I was elected," replied Mr. Todd. "Most of the people lived in Gillup City, and they moved out of the county. That is, some lawyers and surveyors moved 'em out. Then they raised the point that I didn't have jurisdiction in Gillup City, and I wouldn't have jurisdiction in Silver-Tip County unless my legal domicile was there, and my cookin' and washin' was did inside the county. Well, I moved up here to this prospector's cabin. I do my own cookin', and the washin'—well, it ain't important."

"What do you do for a jail?" asked Short.

"Well," drawled the sheriff, "I ain't needed one yet. All the men that I have took, so far, couldn't get away after I taken 'em."

"You have to have a courthouse, don't you?" asked High.

"My cases is all settled by Judge Colt, and he is apt to hold court anywhere. They ain't no appeal to cases when he passes on 'em, so they ain't nothin' for lawyers to do. I reck'n I'm a strange sheriff in a strange county. Far as I know, this cabin and two more is all the houses in Silver-Tip County. Mostly, the citizens lives in camps, and caves in the gulches."

"I don't see how a Texan could put up with the like of that," growled Old Short.

"He couldn't, commonly," said Todd. "I wouldn't, if I hadn't been driv to it by circumstances over which I had no control. As I tells you boys, I used to drive stage out of El Paso, until the railroads taken my job away from me. Then I drifts west, and lands at Gillup City. They's a stage line from there to the railroad. I knows they'll always be one, because the devil couldn't drag a bag of cinders out of here any other way. So, I signs on as a stage driver. They my troubles begin, and finally, I gets fired off the job, for nothin'."

"Aw, hell," murmured High.

"Fact. I was stuck up nine times in a year, and every time I had a flock of dust and gold bars aboard. The last time somebody raised a yell that I was standin' in with the stick-up gangs, and they let me out. I don't recollect ever bein' riled worse than what I was then. I never taken a penny that weren't mine in my life, and everybody that knowed me at all, knowed it. I says to myself that I aim to clean up Silver-Tip County, and—"

"Which way do that stage road run from here, Mister Todd?" High asked.

"Which way? Huh? They ain't but one way that anything but a eagle could

get out'n Gillup City. That's right up Silver-Tip Gulch."

"We comes down that road," growled Short. "I don't see how a stage could make it up there."

"Nothin' the matter with that road," snorted Todd. "A real stage driver that can put six mustangs anywhere he wants 'em, don't give a damn whether he has any road or not. The passengers is apt to raise hell about it, but mostly they don't make but one trip."

"So, you set out to clean Silver-Tip County—" began High.

"I shore did, and the only way I could do it was to get elected sheriff. They's right smart sprinkling of humans in Gillup City, and they wanted to see some cleanin' done. The other crowd wanted things left wide open. Fact is, they didn't want the thugs, gamblers, and stick-up men pestered, because they lived off'n 'em. Well, when I gets into the campaign, I finds out that the two crowds is about equal. They was runnin' a red-eyed gambler name Joe Perkins agin me. Joe, he stands for a wide-open town, nights, days and Sundays.

"One night, just before election day, a gang was whoopin' it up in the Blue Nugget Saloon. I was in there, and Joe Perkins was talkin' right smart with his mouth. Somebody yells what's the use of everybody in town getting all het up over the election. That what they wants is the best man for the job. Why not let Joe and me shoot it out. Joe whirls on me, and goes for his gun. Then— They puts up another feller, but when the election comes, I wins hands down."

"Natural you would," grinned High.

"Well," said Neal Todd, "to make a long story a little longer, as soon as I takes office, I sets in to clean up Gillup City. I ain't been sheriff a month until the county court goes to raisin' hell about the expense of buryin' gents that misunderstands my orders. Then the old gang that was agin me all the time hires a lawyer, and buys a surveyor. Then what I done told you happens, and I moves up here, but— I'm still keepin' my campaign promises. I ain't got Silver-Tip County cleaned yet, but I'm workin' at it.

"They's two main gangs of stick-up men in the Gulch. I ain't had time to hunt their nests, because about every time I steps out of my cabin, I has a gunfight with some of 'em. Them that was here last night was Red Henley's men. Red sent me word that he aimed to get me. The other gang is headed by a tough hombre, named Bill Blair. They are just plain killers, and robbers. Them and Henley's gang don't work together, but Bill Blair sent me word that I better leave my measure for a coffin, with the undertaker in Gillup City. I reck'n he thought I was apt to need one."

Sheriff Neal Todd calmly stuffed an ancient pipe with some strange mixture that is used in dipping cattle and sheep, lit it, and sat silently smoking, and staring into the fire. High and Short looked at one another. For once in their life, they were both speechless. After a while, Neal Todd rose and said:

"Reck'n I'll walk down and look at Old Silver-Tip. She ain't roarin' so much. Must be so big she can't roar. Looks like they had a cloud-bust or something, clean out on the *mesa* at the head of the gulch." Neal Todd pulled his hat down, stepped out the cabin door, and walked off toward the creek.

"Now, see here, Short," said High. "I been here long enough. I'm plumb ready and rearin' to go some place else."

"Shut up," growled Short. "We are in the dry. That old gent is friendly to us. He's got some flour and bacon, coffee and molasses. We can keep warm and eat. If we went out in that rain, we'd drown standing up. Besides that, we can't get to Gillup City, and I'll be damned if I go back

up that gorge, after what Neal Todd says they is up there."

"Short," said High, soberly, "you ain't got's much sense as a short-horn tick. That old gent is either crazy, or he's the biggest liar on earth. Whatever he is, we got some pretty damn good circumstantial evidence that somebody wants him."

"Yes," growled Short. "Also, some evidence that he's hard to get. The only other animal on earth that could have took that slug in his foretop, and lived to talk about it would be a buffalo bull. He's one of them fatalists."

"What's them?"

"Why, a gent that believes he won't go until his time comes, no matter how many slugs hits him; and that he will go when his time comes, if nothing but a fishworm bites him."

"I see," chuckled High. "What's he goin' to say, if one of them old soft-nosed .30-30 slugs crawls through the middle of him, some time when he's makin' smoke?"

"He won't say nothin'. It'll be his time to go."

"It dam shore will," grinned High. "It's my time to go—from here, right now. Soon as that creek runs down, I take the trail, and you can follow if you want to. If I knowed the ground was real soft down there, I'd go to that bluff, and jump into Gillup City. I ain't got no hankerin' after being holed up here with a crazy man, or else with a liar worse than you are. I—"

UNFRIENDLY COMPANY

Wham! Wham-wham! A gun had bellowed up on the shelf where the alleged stage road ran, and Sheriff Neal Todd had replied with a couple of quick shots. The next moment, the sheriff stepped in at the door, and said, calmly:

"Looks like we are going to have company, gents. I'll just stand here in the door, and speak 'em fair, if they comes up peaceable. One of you drag that old Sharp's and the bag of shells out from under my bunk, please. Thank you. Now, you'll find a couple of them new-fangled repeating rifles in the corner, with that old coat over 'em. Them gents may be peaceable, but they ain't nothin' like bein' prepared for war in time of—" Sheriff Todd did not finish the sentence.

A gun roared up the hill, and the bullet thudded into the door-jamb, within a foot of his head. He stepped back into the cabin, and said, musingly: "This ain't no weather for a gunfight. Them gents orto waited until it quits rainin'. They'll get they guns all rusted, and—" Again the sheriff's comment was cut short, as a shower of bullets peppered the roof and walls of his cabin.

With the light step of a cat in wet grass Sheriff Todd stepped to one side of the door, punched some chinking out of a crack with the muzzle of his old Sharp's, and stuck it through. Up on the shelf, a dozen men sat their horses. The old Sharp's roared, once. Two horses and a man went down, and the dirt-dobbers nests fell off the rafters of the cabin. The next second, a slug wandered in through the crack, and caught the Old Buffalo gun amidships. It made the sheriff's hands tingle. He turned the gun loose, and it slid out the crack, and clattered on the rocks.

"We got him now," yelled Black Bill Blair. One of Mr. Blair's men was down, and one was afoot, but that was a small matter. He knew that Smelter-Drain Gulch was bound to be full of water, and that the sheriff couldn't escape. He was going to take him, this time, and take him good. Bill knew that the sheriff was a gunner, but the robber chief had some gunners in his own gang. "Down the slope fellers. He can't get all of us. Four of you go down there. The rest of us will shell the cabin."

High and Short had punched holes in the cabin wall, near a corner. "Hiram,"

said Short, as they settled to their guns, "them gents may not want us, but they are apt to take us, if they come in there. Anyway, we are Sheriff Todd's guests, and—" Short didn't finish the remark. A slug knocked a lot of dirt in his face. The four men started down that slope, while the others poured lead at the cabin.

Two of the four men got down the hill all right—they rolled down, after they fell from their horses. The other two turned and scrambled back to the shelf, where Bill Blair and his other killers were still shelling that old cabin. Bullets were singing like bees along that shelf, now.

Fifty yards to the south of where Blair and his men were, the stage road ran through a sort of cut, leaving a great heap of stones between it and the cabin. Blair

we just got to stop him, and do it now, while he can't get across to Gillup, and get more cartridges. Way he's using 'em, he'll be out in about five minutes. Then we'll go in and take him apart."

Mr. Blair was a *banditto* of fair judgment, and plenty of sand, but there were things that he did not know. That was particularly true of that stage road, and Old Neal Todd's knowledge of it. Neal Todd knew every twist, turn, and pitfall on that road. He had swung a string of mustangs over it too often. He almost knew the boulders along the route by name. He knew, too, that there was only about fifty feet of that cut that was deep enough to hide a man's head, when he was on a horse.

Blair and his men were huddled in the

They Poured Lead Into The Rocks

jumped his horse for that cut, and his men followed— That is, some of them did. Two more went from their horses before they gained the sheltering cut. Five of Bill Blair's twelve men were down and out, and he had done nothing, he thought. In fact, he was sure that he had done nothing, for he supposed no one was there but the sheriff, and a gun was still barking from time to time.

"Fellers," Blair said to his men, as they sat behind the sheltering rocks, "Old Neal Todd is the best and fastest damn gunner in the world. If I didn't know that he had been outlawed, and run clean out of Gillup City, and that nary man in the whole country would go within fifty foot of him, I'd think he had a whole regiment in that cabin. If we had Neal Todd with us, we could run this country until kingdom come.

"Ain't no use to talk about that, though. Neal Todd wouldn't throw in with nobody, unless it was the Devil. He said he was going to clean old Silver-Tip, and he's goin' to do it, if he ain't stopped. So,

deepest part of the cut, still talking about the best way to smoke the old terror out of his cabin. Sheriff Neal Todd opened the cabin door, softly, and stepped outside. He picked up his old Sharp's, and stepped back into the house, closing the door behind him. Then he said, musingly:

"Best dang gun that was ever made on earth, I reck'n. I seen 'em run over by waggins, dropped off'n the top of bluffs, and every other thing done to 'em, but they'd still shoot."

He jerked the lever of the old cannon, threw out the empty shell, and put in another. Then he walked over to where High and Short were still peering out the cracks.

"Them gents don't seem real friendly," said the sheriff. "They act right hostile. That's Bill Blair's gang. All of 'em, I reck'n. I was afeared they'd think of me bein' cut off from Gillup, and come in on me. Can you see anybody movin' out thar?"

"No," said Short. "They are in that cut, and—"

"And it's a damn pore place to be," chuckled the sheriff. "Now, listen, gents. If I could get Blair and his gang, it would go a long ways to'ds cleanin' Old Silver-Tip. They are in a right bad preedicker-ment. I don't care how many of 'em goes on to'ds Gillup, but I don't want nary one of 'em to go back the other way. I think I kin flush 'em out'n that cut. You gents just kindly don't let any go back up the stage road. Get ready now. They'll show theyselves any minute."

High and Short trained their rifles on the stage road, to the north and left of that cut. They were wondering just what Old Neal Todd was going to do, that would run those men out of the cut. The old terror was talking to his Buffalo gun, in plaintive tones:

"Well, Betsy, we have did some good work together, and it's right important that we do some more now. Let's see, old gal. It's about a hundred and ten yards to that rock, and it's the size of a washtub. I've wondered since the first time I driv that road, why the hell it didn't fall off'n there. I reck'n it was just waiting until now." Then he looked around at High and Short, crouched in their corner: "Ready, gents. Don't let none get back up the stage road."

The next moment that old gun bellowed. That boulder broke into half a dozen pieces and fell into the cut, at the deepest place. Three men spurred out of the cut, to make a getaway back up the road toward their hang-out. High and Short got two of them. The other was making all speed when the old Sharps roared again. Man and horse both went down.

"Right good work, Betsy," chuckled the sheriff. "Watch 'em, gents. Let 'em go to'ds Gillup, if they want to, but not back the other way."

Huddled in the deepest part of the cut, Blair and his remaining four men had no inclination to go back up the road, after seeing what had happened to those who had tried it.

"Well, gents," said the sheriff, "you all are right friendly and helpful, and I shore appreciate it. I ain't got no office and seal, and things like that, but as soon as this little rukus is over, I'll find a piece of paper, and put it in writing that you are my deputies. Then the law can't handle you if you happen to hurt some gent inside Silver-Tip County."

That was a relief to High and Short, for they were under the impression that they had already hurt one or two, painfully, if not seriously. They kept their eyes on that road, like good deputies, but the hair on the back of High's neck wouldn't behave. He recalled Sheriff Todd's remark about what happened to some citizens of Silver-Tip County, he misunderstood his orders.

Nothing stirred in the cut, and finally the sheriff drawled:

"Them gents is apt to go to sleep, and forget where they are at. I'll see can I remind 'em. Watch the road."

The old Sharps roared, and a bushel or two of rocks broke loose and fell into the cut. A powerful horse plunged back up the road, with a black giant tugging at the reins. The old cannon roared again. The horse went down, while the man sprang clear, and started to run. High and Short didn't have anything against that giant, but they had orders from Neal Todd, so they both fired, and the man went down. There were only four men left in the cut, and they didn't stay there. They tore out toward Gillup City, and disappeared down the road.

"Fine, fine," chortled Sheriff Todd. "Doin' right smart cleaning today. Keep this up a little while, and Silver-Tip will be a plumb decent county to live in. Only four got away, and I got them canned. You gents just watch the road, and don't let 'em come back this way. I'm going

to see can I interest 'em some." Sheriff Neal Todd stepped out of the cabin, looked around a moment, then trotted off toward the cut. They saw him stand on the battered top of the rocks for a moment, then disappear into the cut.

"There goes the gamest old geezer in the world," growled Short, "or else—"

"Or else the dangdest fool that ever got loose from a loonatic asylum, and hid in these mountains," grinned High.

LEAD SHOWERS

"Hiram," said Short, "we don't have to stand here and squint through them cracks."

"That's what the sheriff tells us to do," replied High. "I'm a deputy, and I aim to take orders— That is, I aim to take 'em until I can find my braunk, then, the first time Mr. Sheriff Neal Todd bats his eyes, I aim to ride from here. Sheriff, deputies, or what not, no civilized world ain't goin' to stand for slaughter like what this Todd gent is doing."

"Aw, hell, Hiram," said Short. "He ain't did much, yet. It'll take a lot more than that to clean this section, if it's as bad as he says it is. Let's get out and see where the crazy old devil went, and what for."

"Not me," demurred High. "I got orders to watch that road, and I aims to—"

"Well, we can watch the road, and at the same time we can be lookin' for them braunks of our'n. We got to find them, or we can't never go no place."

"All right. If you put it that way, I'll go, but you have to take the blame if the sheriff jumps me for disobeying orders. I'd be right glad to see that old sunfisher of mine."

They left the cabin and walked toward the road, rifles in hand. Everything was still. The two men that lay at the foot of the slope, and those in the road were very still.

"Right devastatin' mess," chuckled High. "Let's foller the road a ways, to'ds Gillup City. Maybe we'll find our braunks in a hole in the bluff, or some place like that."

They got into the road, a little below the cut. They didn't see or hear anything of Neal Todd, so they walked on down the road. Quarter of a mile from the cabin, the road seemed to be going right on over the bluff, but thought better of it and turned to the left. The partners pulled up, on the edge of the bluff, and looked over.

"If that dang stage comes gallopin' down here with me," said High, "I'd be plumb crazy, dead, and sproutin' wings before I seen the turn in the road. Look down there. That must be that Smelter-Drain Gulch that Mister Todd told us about. It's level full, and a hundred and fifty foot wide. The creek's still up, and the back-water is smooth as a baby's face. I reck'n— Listen!"

Boom! Boom! A gun roared sullenly back under the bluff. The next moment, four horsemen came tearing along the road, and pulled up at the edge of the smooth water in the gulch. The old cannon roared again. That time the slug cut off a limb the size of a fence post, right over the men.

"Oh-oh," grinned High. "The sheriff must have stubbed his toe that time. He missed plumb bad and— He didn't miss that time." The old cannon had roared again, and a man went down. The other three jumped their horses into the still water, and struck out for the other side. The old gun roared once more, then was silent. The sheriff was out of ten-pound shells, and knew he could never get any more. But, that last roar of Old Betsy had not been in vain. The hindmost of the three men in the water went from his saddle and sank. "Aw, hell, Short. That's plumb scandalous bad. If we associates with that old cyclone, we are apt to be plumb ruined."

"I know it, Hiram," mourned Short.

"but what can we do? We're in this mess now. Only thing I'm afraid of is that when he works up everything else they is to kill in these roughs, he'll turn on us. He's shore crazy."

"No doubt about that," grinned High, "but he's plumb active for a crazy man, as old as he is. I'll bet if somebody ketched him and held his laigs, he'd kick hisself to death, like a grasshopper or a cricket."

"I wouldn't want to be the one that helt them laigs," growled Short. "Especial, if he had them two old cannons in them leather pockets. Let's get on back to the cabin, before he sees us, and maybe takes a shot or two at us by mistake."

High and Short walked back up the stage road, and entered the bullet-torn cabin. There was no sound about the place, and a less inviting place of residence could not have been found in all the wild and untamed West.

"Aw, héll, Short," whined High, as he stopped at the door and peered into the dark cabin. "I can't stand this much longer. I ain't skeered, I'm just plumb damn' disgusted, and ruined. That water down there is smooth. We ain't got no braunks. Come night, I aim to slip down there, swim acrost, and go to that town. The sheriff says they's a sprinkling of humans there. I'd like to see just one more human before I leave this earth."

"Hiram," said Short, "I had that very thing in mind. The only trouble is going to be slipping away from that old tiger. I don't think he ever sleeps."

"We could tell him that we are used to takin' a little walk for exercise, just before we goes to bed. We got to get away from here before the enraged populace finds out we are here. We— Hold the deal. Listen! Sounds like some more of the sheriff's friends is coming, and he ain't at home." They could hear the thud of hoofs, up on the stage road.

Dashing into the cabin, High and Short got back to the cracks where Sheriff Neal Todd had left them, and peered out. Then they chuckled with joy. Sheriff Todd was coming down the slope, leading both of their old sunfishers, with the saddles on them. The old bronchos were battered up a bit by hail, where the saddles had not protected them, but were still going strong.

"Hello in there, gents," called Sheriff Todd. "Come out here. I told you a braunk had more sense than a man. These old crow-baits had got under an overhanging bluff, and kept out'n the worst of it, or they'd be dead. It's cleared off, now. Unsaddle. I got a little bag of corn in the cabin, and you can feed 'em."

"Short," said High, when the sheriff went into the cabin after the corn, "do reck'n we orto unsaddle? First time I see a chance to straddle my braunk and get a fifty-foot start, I aim to take that stage road back the way we comes, boogers or no boogers. They ain't nothin' back that way worse than a crazy sheriff, and he said a buzzard couldn't get out of here any other way, and— I ain't no buzzard."

"Shut up, you bowlaigged ape," growled Short. "Jerk that saddle off before he comes back. You know what he said about obeying orders. He— Look out! Here he comes."

They fed the horses, and then Sheriff Neal Todd calmly suggested that they clean up a bit, and dispose of the kill. They all climbed to the road, and rolled the dead down the slope, except the horses.

Gillup's Citizens Make Medicine

The creek had gone down a little, and the sheriff said, as they tossed the first body in:

"Crick's beginning to fall. They'll go right out to the middle of the stream, and ought to go forty miles. I don't care where they go, so they get outside of Silver-Tip County."

Then, when the horrible disposition of the gun-fodder was over, Neal Todd looked up at the sky and remarked:

"Plumb cleared off. Probably won't rain again for two year. Crick'll run down pretty quick now. Must be middle of the afternoon, and we haven't et since morning. Guess we better go in and stir up a little bait of grub. Water'll be out of Smelter-Drain by morning, and we can slip across and get some more supplies. I didn't tell you gents that I has right smart trouble getting grub. They gets a city marshal, after they runs me out. His main job is to keep the decent people from hurting the thugs, Gillup being a wide-open town and all. The rest of the job is keeping me from getting grub. I been killin' a city marshal nearly every time I goes to town, but they always gets another one."

Sheriff Todd dropped an armful of guns and belts on the floor with a clatter, where they could dry and be "iled" before he put them in his collection. Then he calmly set about preparing the last of his food. They wouldn't eat another meal until they made a raid on Gillup City. High and Short had their minds made up that the present meal was going to last them until they got back out the head of Silver-Tip Gulch; but they refrained from mentioning it to that old blue-eyed terror, who was telling them about his little *pasear* down the stage road when he found their horses. They listened respectfully, and didn't mention the fact that they had seen him kill two men at the Smelter-Drain. When the food was ready, they all fell to in silence.

Meantime there was a bit of excitement in Gillup City. Old Silver-Tip had been thirty-five feet higher than the record. Water in Smelter-Drain had backed into the little jerkwater smelter, and put the fires out. Nothing was going on. Some mule freight teams had gone out a week before to bring in supplies. It would be a month, now, before they could get back, for they would have to practically build a road down Silver-Tip Gulch. Grub was likely to run low, and everybody was trying to get his share, and store it against famine. Nobody was working. A crowd of men foregathered in the Blue Nugget Saloon. One old prospector said the rise was a good thing. That nobody had ever found a trace of gold in Silver-Tip Gorge, but that there was always gold in the bars below Gillup, after a big rise. He didn't know why, but thought maybe it rained gold in those big "cloud-busts."

One of the two men who escaped from the wrath of Old Neal Todd and swam the drain, was El Ellson. Mr. Ellson was a handsome and highly educated *banditto*, with a modicum of brains in his shapely head. As he swung from his wet saddle, in front of the Blue Nugget, Ellson came face to face with a hunch-backed, red-headed, heavy-set man, who had the face and the long arms of a gorilla.

"Hello, El," greeted the red-head. "Looks like you been in the wet some."

"Howdy, Red," greeted El. "Yes, I swam the drain."

"What! Ain't gone crazy have you?" stared Red Henley.

"No," smiled El, "but I wanted to get to town pretty bad."

"Oh, you did? Well, I been wanting to get away from here pretty bad. All my gang but three is in here. Them three would been, but we had a little brush with Old Neal Todd as we comes down the Gulch yestiddy, and Neal he gets one of my men. It made some of the boys mad,

and they goes back over there to take Neal in his cabin, while it's raining. Did you see anything of 'em as you comes down the stage road?"

"No," replied El, "but we met their horses up the Gulch a ways, and—"

"What! Didn't you see the boys? Did you stop at Old Neal's cabin?"

"Most of us did," replied El, with a wry grin. Then he told Red Henley what had happened to Blair and his gang, and that he and the one other man were all that were left.

"Why, El," said Red Henley, in astonishment, "do you mean that old hellion can shoot so fast that twelve or fifteen men couldn't go into that shack and take him out?"

"I told you what happened, Red," said Ellson. "And now I'll tell you something else. Old Neal Todd said he was going to clean Silver-Tip Gulch. He has done it. I'm satisfied he got the three of your men who went over there last night. Silver-Tip Gulch is clean. There is nobody in it now except Neal Todd."

"There'll be somebody else in it as soon as that water gets out of the drain," snapped Red Henley. "I sent that old hellion word that I aimed to get him, and I'm going to do it."

"I'm a sort of gambling fool," grinned El Ellson. "I don't want to bet with you, because you won't be able to pay the bet, but I'd like to bet somebody ten to one that you never go back into Silver-Tip Gulch."

"How come I won't?"

"Because Old Neal Todd won't let you cross the drain, and climb that mile of crooked road before he kills you. I always thought Old Neal was just a crazy human, but he's a crazy devil. He can shoot faster and farther than any man on earth. I saw him shoot from three cracks in his cabin at one time, and he killed two of our boys at the drain, at least half a mile."

"I ain't afraid of him," snarled Red Henley.

"Maybe not," smiled Ellson, "but my bet still stands."

"Huh," growled Red. "Something worse than Old Neal Todd is goin' to grab this town. The society bunch that calls theyselves decent people, has hogged up all the grub in town, and cached in their cabins. When the other bunch gets hongry, they're goin' be war among the natives."

"Oh, that may not happen," said El. "The teams may get in before the grub gets too low. Let's get into the Nugget and get some drinks before the liquor is all gone."

The boisterous crowd went on drinking. Ellson's story got all over the place, and all sorts of suggestions were made. One bully got up on a table and made a speech.

"Gents," said he, "it has come to a showdown. We know that the surveyor lied when he said Gillup weren't in Silver-Tip County, and we know that Judge Petty lied when he told Old Neal Todd that he'd have to leave Gillup and live in Silver-Tip or he couldn't be sheriff. I was ag'in that, because it couldn't do no good, and it ain't done any. It has split the town wide open, and if Neal Todd comes in here and heads the society bunch, the devel can't stop him from cleaning Gillup, just like he has cleaned the Gulch, and like he said he would clean Silver-Tip County."

"He won't clean nothin'," roared Red Henley. "I aim to nail his hide to a tree as soon as the water goes down, so I can git to him. Fill 'em up, gents. Here's to Sheriff Neal Todd—in hell."

GILLUP HAS MARSHAL TROUBLE

Unaware that he was in imminent danger of making a trip to the lower regions, Sheriff Neal Todd strolled down to the creek about sunset. When he came back, he said:

"Gent, Old Silver-Tip has went down until it looks right nacherl. I wouldn't wonder the water in Smelter-Drain would be low enough for us to cross by the time we can get down there. We kin hold our guns up, and wade it."

"Well, now, Mr. Todd," said Short, "we was heading for Gillup City when you taken us in and gives us shelter, but we didn't know that the way we comes in was the way we has to go out. We was heading for Texas, and thought this was a short-cut. I reck'n we'll just saddle, and ride—"

"You won't do no such a dam thing," snapped the sheriff. "You are my deputies, and you take orders from me. Besides that, you have et up all the grub I had, and you're goin' to help me get some more. I'd of had this gulch cleaned long ago if I had a couple of good deputies like what you gents are. Get yo' guns, and plenty of ammunition. We are heading down the stage road as soon as it gets dark."

High and Short made no further protest. As darkness fell, the three of them left the cabin and headed down the winding road. Todd led the way, apparently unafraid to expose his back to his two deputies.

"Hiram," whispered Short, "when that old heathen gets on that bluff at the turn of the road, let's kill him, and let him fall into Gillup City. Then we can get our braunks and ride from here."

"Yes we can," chuckled High. "If that old storm-cloud hears a gun click behind him he'll whirl and kill us both before we can do anything. Reason he went in front was so he could skylight us, if we start anything. Come on. Let's see what he aims to do."

"I know what he aims to do," growled Short. "He aims to kill another city marshal, and get some grub, while you and me keeps the dogs off'n him. We're follerin' the trail to hell, on foot."

They finally reached the drain. Sheriff Todd looked at the water and the markings on the rocks. Then he stepped into the water just above where the road crossed, and said:

"Just follow me, and make sure that you stay on this ledge. The water is twenty foot deep below here. Keep yo' guns dry. You might need 'em."

The water came to their waists, but they reached the other side of the drain with wet legs and dry guns. Nothing was said until they had gone two hundred yards, and were abreast of an old dobe shack. Then the sheriff pulled up and said:

"Now, gents, the town seems to be right quiet. You two wait here in this old shack. It's a right good place. I been in it two-three times, when a gang was crowding me. Just go in and keep quiet. Maybe I can make it to Cole Taylor's store and get some rations, without being saw by anybody else. Cole and me has always been sorty friendly."

Sheriff Todd stole away in the darkness. When he was gone, High said:

"Now's our chance, Short. We can get back across that drain, grab our braunks, and ride from this sinful section."

"Shut up, you under-sized idjit. The only chance we had was when I wanted to kill that old Devil, and let him fall into Gillup, and you wouldn't do it. We couldn't find that ledge that we crossed on in a week, and I can't swim a damn lick in the road. We're in hell, and the door shut."

That quieted High. All he could do was regret that they had not tried shooting the sheriff, but he still didn't believe that they could have got away with it. Ten minutes passed in utter silence in that cabin, then High jumped and said:

"Oh—oh. I knowed it. There goes another city marshal to the Happy Hunting Ground."

Two shots had crashed, and after that intermittent firing, which seemed to be

coming closer to that shack. Presently Sheriff Todd slipped into the cabin and called, softly:

"All right, gents. I reck'n we'll have company."

"Did—did you get the city marshal?" asked High.

"Dunno. I got three, but it was so dark I couldn't tell who they was. They are apt to— Look out. Listen!"

There was plenty to listen to, now. Another madman was on the rampage. Old Neal Todd had almost reached Cole Taylor's store when some of Red Henley's men recognized him and opened on him. Henley and the others ran out of the Blue Nugget and found three men down. They heard the sheriff running along the street, and opened on him, as they gave chase. Now they had pulled up a little way from the old cabin.

"Come on, gents," roared Red Henley, now beside himself with rage. "He's in that old shack. Crowd up on him. Surround the shack. When he shoots out one hole, we can pour it in at another!"

"Gents," said Sheriff Todd, in a low tone, "them fellers seems to be mad about something. I wouldn't wonder if this little rukus cleans old Silver-Tip, sheriff and any. I'll take the door. One of you get to each window."

Red Henley was leading the attack. There was utter silence in the cabin as Henley marshaled his men to surround it.

"Altogether, now," shouted Henley. "Go in and get him. I'll show him, damn him, who runs Silver-Tip Gulch."

The gang of thugs and bandits, practically all the tough part of Gillup's population, were there. They closed in. The door of that shack spouted flame as Sheriff Neal Todd unlimbered his two old cannons for a second, then sprang back to one side of the door. Some of the mob had gone down. It was too dark to see how many, if any one had been looking, and no one was. When the door flamed, the other wings of the attacking party pressed forward to fire in at the windows. They didn't. Those windows fairly smoked and flamed.

High and Short were making good deputies, because they knew that they couldn't afford to fall into the hands of that mob of killers. Red Henley was shouting himself hoarse, and daring any man to go with him in through that door. He was within ten feet of the open door when Sheriff Todd stopped him, definitely, and for all time. The high sheriff didn't stop at that. He stood in the open door and moved the enemy down.

The other two gangs broke away from their attacks on the windows, and ran around to the front, to seek safety in numbers. There was neither safety nor numbers there. At least, the better part of the numbers were dead numbers. Two of Henley's gang were left, but Red Henley himself had fallen a victim to his own courage.

El Ellson, the man who had crossed the drain with him, and the two Henley killers, got together, out of range.

"Boys," said Ellson, "we are what's left of the two gangs in Silver-Tip Gulch. Old Neal Todd said he would clean it, and he did. He's bound to be in league with the devil. No human on earth could shoot like that. If he stays here, he'll get us if we don't leave. Unless we can beat him across the Drain, and on out of the Gulch, we haven't got a chance. If you'll trust me to lead, we'll try to get away, and start a new gang—but not in Silver-Tip."

The four of them found their horses, gave that shack a wide berth, and gained the Drain, which had gone down until they could cross without swimming. Silver-Tip Gulch would be clean, as soon as they could get out the head of it, but Sheriff Todd did not know that. In the thick darkness of the old shack, High and Short could hear him throw out the empties, re-

load, then raise and lower the hammers of his armament. Presently he said:

"Sorty quiet out thar, gents. I don't know how much damage we does, but some I reck'n. Wouldn't wonder they are rallying to make a clean-up. Plenty giant powder in these mining towns, and they are apt to try to blow us out of here. Watch close, and if you skylight anybody, let him have it. You can't go wrong. They all need killin'."

Minutes passed, and then there was the sound of someone walking a little way from the shack. The man was out in front, and seemed to be coming toward the shack. High and Short heard the rusty hammers of Sheriff Todd's guns click, and then a voice:

"Hey! Muzzled them howitzers down, you damned old fool. This is Cole Taylor. I want to talk to you some."

"Oh, it is?" returned the sheriff. "Howdy, Cole. I was aimin' to come to see you, as soon as the smoke settled."

"Well, come on out here. I got something to tell you."

"Gents," the sheriff said, in low tones to High and Short, "just keep yo' seats. That sounds like Cole Taylor, but it may be that damned city marshal. If it is him, I'll be back as soon as I can kill him. If it's Cole, we are apt to talk some."

Sheriff Todd did not lower the hammers of his two trouble-makers, but he stepped out the door and went toward that voice with a gun in each hand. High and Short, crouched there in the inky darkness, heard a few low, growling words, then the sound of two men walking away toward town.

"Hiram," groaned Short, "I reck'n you have heard preachers talk about folks bein' cast into outer darkness."

"I shore have," chuckled High.

"Well, you and me has been cast one hell of a long ways into outer darkness, and the outerest darkness I ever seen. We been in hell ever since we rides into the upper end of that Silver-Tip Gulch, and this gent that calls hisself Sheriff Neal Todd ain't nobody but the old wazzle-tailed rascal of a Devil hisself. No human could do what he does and get away with it. He—"

Wham! Wham! A couple of guns barked up on the street.

"Oh—oh, there goes the city marshal," chuckled High, "and they can't appoint another one until the morning. Looks like this peaceful town is goin' to be unprotected from rowdyism, and all sorts of ungodly happenings, through this terrible night."

"Shut up laughin' about it," snarled Short, "or I'll bend a gun over that knot on the top end of yo' neck. You ain't got no sense of decorum and reason. Here we are in this dark hole, and apt to get shotten a whole lot if we tries to get out and go back to our braunks, even if we could swim, and we can't. Most of our lives we been where they weren't enough water to swim a half-grown tadpole. If that old fool runs into the city marshal and gets killed, we'll have a hell of a lot of explaining to do when morning comes, with a ring of dead men two feet deep all round this cabin. I—"

"Shut up," snapped High, "and listen. Somebody's comin'."

The catlike step of Sheriff Neal Todd sounded on the wet sand as he approached the cabin.

"You can come out, now, gents," he called. "Everything is all right now. We can go up to the Nugget and get some drinks."

"I shore heard you that time," chuckled High. "What was that gun-stuff about just now?"

"Oh, that? Why, that was Bull Cates, the new city marshal, tryin' his speed on the draw. I meets him in front of the Nugget, where there was a light. Bull was right peart with his gunhand, but his gun hung, somehow. They'll have to have a special election, I reck'n."

Sheriff Neal Todd led his two deputies to the main street, High was cheered a bit by the promise of some drinks, but there was no solace for Short, whose besetting sin was poker. Water was squashing in their boots, since wading that Drain, and their hearts were very low, lower than their boots, they thought. They gained the one street of the town, and saw the friendly light from the open door of the Blue Nugget, then suddenly the sheriff, who was leading, gasped:

"Whoa!" His two cannons sprang from their leather pockets, and swung up menacingly. "Damn that cat. I thought it was somebody, and I left word for everybody to stay off the street."

They went on and entered the Blue Nugget. There was only a small and select company there. Cole Taylor, as mayor of the city, had got them together for a real progressive purpose. In the little assembly were Judge Petty, who had ruled on the constitutionality of Sheriff Todd's place of residence; the surveyor who had run the line, throwing Gillup outside the county; Mayor Cole and four members of the city council. They all approached the bar and solemnly did their duty. Then Judge Petty wiped his mouth on the back of his hand, cleared his ponderous throat, and said:

"Gentlemen: On behalf of the city of Gillup, and in the place of, and instigated by Mayor Cole Taylor, I want to make a few remarks. The surveyor has discovered that he made a slight mistake in his field notes, misplaced a monument or two, and found the stumps of some bearing-trees that had been burned down. He now declares that the *City of Gillup* is in Silver-Tip County, and I am instructed to say that the city council, and the mayor for the people, declare Sheriff Neal Todd to be the best damn sheriff in the Rocky Mountains, bar none. He can shoot faster, farther, and more of it, than any man that ever busted a cap. If any gent present don't believe it, just let him call the sheriff. Put her thar, Neal, and long may you wave."

"Gents," said Sheriff Todd, "y' all know I ain't a speech-maker. Most of my langwidge has been used cussin' mean braunks and stick-up men. Anyway, actions speaks louder than words, and I have acted some, in cleaning old Silver-Tip. I appreciate the confidence of the citizenry of this here town. All I ask now is my old job, drivin' stage out'n Gillup City. I can do that and be sheriff too."

"I'll see that you get the job," declared Mayor Cole Taylor. "I've already got it for you, provided you clean Silver-Tip, and you have shore cleaned it, good and plenty."

"Hooray for Sheriff Neal Todd," roared the little crowd.

"Just a minute, gents," begged the sheriff. "The Bible says, 'Render unto Cæsar that which is his'n.' I don't aim to take nothin' which belongs to Cæsar. I shore cleaned old Silver-Tip, but I had some help. These here gents, Mr. High and Mr. Short, is a couple gun-slingin' hellions from Texas. They been my deputies since last night, and they are good ones. I want you to do what you kin to make 'em happy and satisfied in Gillup City."

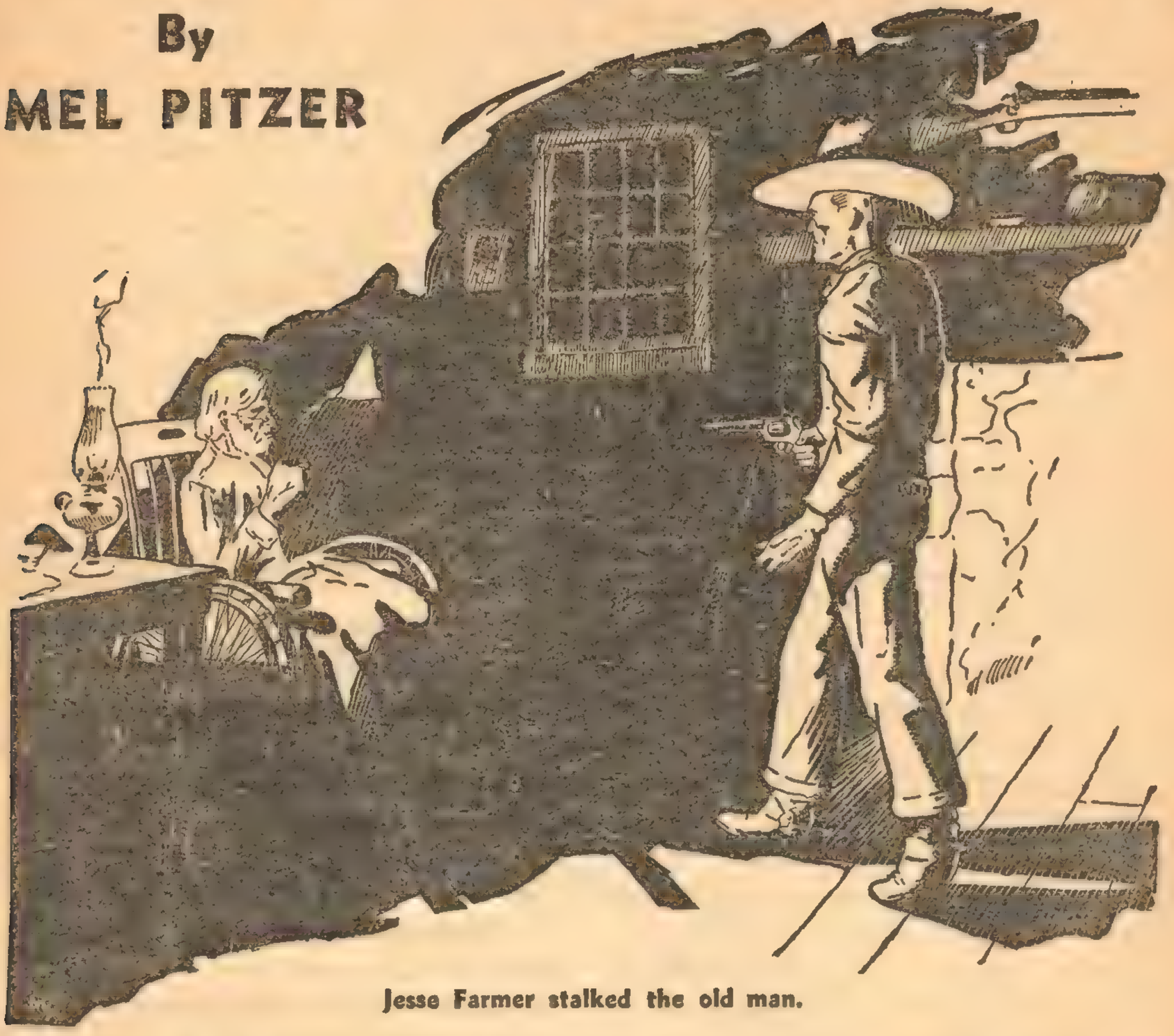
Then the orgy began. At daylight Short had won everything that the mayor and city council had on them. He had also won the surveyor's compass and Jacob-staff, and Judge Petty's limited law library. High had been hanging to the brass rail all this time. When there were no more worlds for Short to conquer, he approached High and suggested some breakfast.

"Aw' ri' ol' par'ner," grinned High. "Fine place, this Gillup City. It was right hard to get into, but if I always feel like I do now, I don't give a whoop whether we ever get out of it or not. Come on. We'll eat a half a hawg, a settin' of aigs, and—some canned peaches."

MAVERICK GOLD

By

MEL PITZER



Jesse Farmer stalked the old man.

When A Man Has His Heritage Shot Out From Under Him He Is Apt To Start Naming Bullets For Somebody

Shelling Dubois was fast, very fast, but tall, unsmiling Jesse Farmer was faster. One minute Jesse's hand was empty and the next it was holding a big .45 belching flame. Big Dubois stiffened, his left hand tore at the round black hole in his shirt under his heart, now starting to turn crimson, and then like a great axed tree he fell.

Silence held in the Maverick saloon at Rimrock. Then suddenly someone whispered, "Gawd! Shell Dubois the fastest gun-hawk in the county beaten to the draw. Old Man Taylor will have to get a new gunny."

The tall stranger was speaking, "Any of you hombres care to take up for the deceased? If so, step out." No one moved. "If the sheriff aims to see me, I'll be found at the hotel. Adios!" And then Jesse Farmer disappeared through the batwing doors of the saloon.

Hearing the shots a crowd was beginning to gather as Jesse elbowed his way through it and entered the Moose Hotel across the street. A half hour later he heard a knock on the door of his room. "Who is it?" Jesse called. "Sheriff Val Higgins," came the reply.

Jesse tiptoed softly to the door, turned the key, and stepping behind so the opening door would conceal him, he called softly, "Come in!" His gun was raised ready to shoot. No use taking chances, he reflected, Dubois may have had some friends in town. The door opened and Jesse saw the florid features, the faded blue eyes, the long flowing mustaches of the six-foot Val Higgins he had known as a boy.

"Wa-al, as I live and breathe, if it ain't Jesse Farmer," said Sheriff Higgins. Jesse holstered his gun and shook hands. "Hi-ya, Hig, long time no see," said Jesse.

Val Higgins looked Jesse over from head to foot. "Boy, you sure have growed. Got the same blond wavy hair your old man useter have in his younger days; yes, an' the same blue eyes. An' that nose turned up a little on the end. The thin lips an' square chin. Damned if you ain't your ol' man all over again, 'cept that you're taller an' huskier. An', Jesse"—Val Higgins' face wore a worried look now—"I jus' heerd you're faster with a gun than the best gent in these parts."

"If you mean that fight at the saloon," Jesse replied, "the gent brung it on himself. I'm drinkin' a sas'prilla, plumb peaceful, an' he come along an' thought I needed somethin' stronger. We seen things diff'rent ways an' I settled 'em my way. It was self-defence."

"I agrees with you; it was self-defence, but tell me, Jesse, when did you get to this section of the country?"

"Two days ago, Val, but I didn't amble into town until today. I hunted around for a place an' finally bought the Widder Jenkins' little ranch over on Colt's Neck Creek."

"Jesse," Val Higgins said, his eyes slitted now, "did you come back to settle down, or did you come back for something else?"

Jesse started to pace the floor. Then he stopped and looked Val Higgins squarely in the eye.

"I come back, Val, not to settle down, but to blast everyone of the Taylors to hell. They framed Dad and sent him to prison to die of lung trouble, an' I'm usin' the Widder Jenkins' ranch as a cover. They framed him an' took him from God's earth an' sunlight where he belonged. They stopped him from drawin' forty-fives an' made him take his hands an' make horse-hair bridles. I'm goin' to blast them all to hell. For years, Val, I trained an' practiced to be fast, an' if they's anyone kin beat me to the draw, he kin prove it any time."

Val Higgins saw that Jesse Farmer wasn't bragging. It was just a simple statement that he believed.

"Son," Sheriff Higgins said, "you've bin away a long time. People that know'd your Dad hev gone an' the ones that have come here sence think the Taylors are pretty good folks an' furthermore they're rich an' powerful. Ol' Ike is still alive, but he sits in a wheel-chair all day an' his two sons run the ranch with the help of sixteen tough gunswift hombres an' Bill Taylor is the toughest, an' fast as lightnin' with a gun. An' then again, Jesse, Dubois was their chief gunny, an' when they find out he's dead, there's goin' to be trouble. It's gonna be a tough fight for you, boy, but what I'm gettin' at is that your ol' Dad an' me bein' friends, I'll be glad to help you an' I'm jus' as willin' to turn this badge in an' help fight your battle; that is, if you intend to stay instead o' leavin' an' lettin' things be peaceable."

Jesse took the sheriff's hand in his own brown powerful grip. "Thanks, Val, but I don't think I'll need any more help than

just my smoke-pole. If that can't handle things I'll let you know."

"I got to be gittin' along, Jesse." Val Higgins headed for the door. Before reaching it, he turned and said, "Don't forget, you gotta prove that Taylor framed your pop an' got that ranch by fakin' papers in the courts. You're gonna have a hard job provin' it, son. Well, I gotta be gettin' down to the office. Jake Niles, my deputy, has to get his supper. I'll drop over your way tomorrow. So long, Jesse."

"Don't sound as if he wants me to git the ranch back," Jesse muttered after Sheriff Higgins had left. "For an old friend, he sounds plumb doubtful about things."

Late that night Jesse Farmer softly opened the window in his bedroom. He tied his belongings to one end of a rope and dropped them to the ground one story below. Tying the other end to the bedpost, he climbed out of the window and a few seconds later was headed for the rear of the livery stable. No use letting Dubois' friends take him by surprise, especially as Dubois was hooked up with the Taylors.

The liveryman was sleeping. Making as little noise as possible Jesse climbed the ladder leading to the hayloft. Crawling to the darkest corner he laid down and was asleep instantly. Early the next morning Jesse prepared to leave for his ranch. Saddling his big gelding Sungold and mounting, he rode down the one street of Rimrock to a store which proclaimed by a big sign that groceries were for sale. In a few minutes he had made arrangements for the things he wanted for the ranch and untying Sungold he was about to continue on his way when a voice said, "Don't mount that gelding, Jesse Farmer." Jesse swung around. The sharp, grating voice had come from across the street and now Jesse saw a short, stocky scar-faced cowboy standing with his back against the wall of Rimrock's only restaurant. Two guns with black butts rested low on each side. His thumbs were hooked in the cartridge belt and he was crouched low.

"Any reason why I shouldn't mount my own horse?" Jesse asked.

"Sure," came the reply, sharply, "'cause it ain't your hayburner. You stole that gelding from the Taylor's remuda. I saw you."

Jesse Farmer's eyes were mere pin-points of hard granite. His mouth had a half-smile and his chin was jutted forward. "Meanin' what, hombre?" Jesse asked.

"Meanin'," continued Scarface, "that you're a low-down horse-thief." Cowboys within hearing distance of the conversation scrambled for cover. Words like those meant a gun fight. Scarface went for his two black-butted guns. He had them half drawn when Jesse went into action. Once more it seemed as if he had wished his six-gun into his hand and it was there. Two shots rolled out, sounding like one. Almost instantly two spurts of red appeared on the right and left shoulders of the stocky gunman. His guns fell to the dust. His face became distorted in agony. Val Higgins came rushing up. Jesse could have sworn he detected Sheriff Higgins wink at the gunmen.

"Come out, you fools," he bellowed to the townsmen, who had ducked out of the line of fire. "It's all over. Come out an' help me git Pete to the sawbones." He came up to Jesse. "Boy, what a draw," he said. "I've seen some fast ones in my time, but your draw was so fast it was invisible, son. What happened? I didn't hear anything, but I saw everything."

In a few words Jesse explained the cause of the second gun-battle. "It looks like Ike Taylor knows you're in town," Sheriff Higgins replied, "an' he found out somehow that you're Mike Farmer's son. Pete Dane, who you just plugged, was sent to get you, an' he was a good friend of Shell Dubois; in fact, they was buddies."

"How do you know he was sent to get

me?" Jesse inquired, a bit of doubt in his mind.

"I don't know, Jesse, but I guessed he was." Then Sheriff Higgins quickly changed the conversation. "Another case of self-defence, Jesse; he had his guns out almost before you started, but watch out, when they see they can't git you in a fair fight, they'll begin to frame you like they did your Dad."

"I'll kill them all, Val, if I have to," answered Jesse. "I just disabled this Pete feller so he can be a warnin' to the Taylors. Well, I'll be over at the ranch when you want me. Got a lotta work to do." Jesse mounted Sungold and disappeared in a cloud of dust.

Late that afternoon he was repairing a water-hole near the barn when he saw a number of horsemen approaching on the road to Rimrock. The road passed his ranch and then continued on another five miles to a cross-road which turned off leading to the many acres of Ike Taylor's spread. He thought the body of horsemen might pass, but as they came abreast of the gate he saw one man swing down, open the gate wide, and all continued riding through. Jesse dropped the pliers he was using, and eased the gun in his holster as he didn't want it to stick and slow his draw. Jesse continued to watch the approaching strangers. A tall, husky, dark-haired, dark-eyed man was in the lead. He was about thirty years old, and as he came closer Jesse saw that his eyes were set close together. He had a hawk nose and a black mustache. In fact, he was all in black, even to his black holster and gun which stuck out from under the frock coat he wore. He stopped his horse in front of Jesse. "Nice spread you got here, stranger," he said.

"It's fair," Jesse answered. "Be better when I get it fixed up."

"My name's Bill Taylor," continued the man in black.

"Mine's Jesse Farmer."

"Heard as much," Bill Taylor continued. "In town you had a ruckus with one of my men, Shell Dubois. Heard it was self-defence."

"You heard right," Jesse replied.

Bill Taylor looked sharply at Jesse now as he asked: "Figgerin' on stayin' long?"

Jesse felt a dislike for this Bill Taylor, and showed it in his voice. "As long as I feel like stayin', Mister Taylor. You-all got any objections?"

"No, none whatsoever," Taylor replied. "Just wanted to know. Well, guess me an' the boys will git on. And incidentally, Mister Farmer, I saw Pete Dane. He claims you shot him up some."

"Yes," Jesse explained, "he was lookin' for trouble an' he got it."

"They say you're fast, Farmer, fast with the shootin'-iron. You beat Shell Dubois who was the fastest gunny in these parts, but a lotta people don't know that in foolin' lots of times with the boys, I mean drawin' against each other for fun, why I beat Shell Dubois nine times outa ten. Well, see ya some more, Jesse Farmer. S'long!" And Bill Taylor, at the head of his hard-looking cowboys once more went back to the main road through the gate and disappeared around the bend.

Jesse watched until they were out of sight. "So," Jesse mused, "Bill Taylor was letting me know that he was faster than Dubois. Well, we'll see! And the next time I'll teach that braggin' calf to close my gate after him." A week passed and Jesse was beginning to get the ranch in shape. Sheriff Higgins on his last visit had promised to show Jesse where he could buy some good cattle with which to stock the ranch. The Widow Jenkins had only a few head of cattle on the ranch when he bought it, having sold most of her stock to pay debts.

One afternoon Jesse saddled the gelding and headed for town. Half-way there he met Sheriff Higgins. Higgins had a man

with him who was introduced as Cole Mathers, a ranchman as Val Higgins explained from over Red Rock way. "Cole's a old friend of mine an' he's got some good cows to sell. If you're not doin' anything jus' now you kin ride over to his ranch an' do some buyin'. Red Rock is only eleven miles away an' you can make your arrangements an' be back at dark."

"A good idea," Jesse agreed. The sheriff left them and Jesse rode on with Cole Mathers. Mathers was a genial sort of man and liked to talk, and as they rode along conversation drifted from one thing to another until Cole said, "You know, Jesse, there's something queer about that outfit of Ike Taylor's. At different times he's bought cattle from me, an' when I stayed at his ranch it bein' sometimes too late for me to leave for Red Rock, all night I'd hear a kinda poundin' an' crashin'. It seemed to come from the house itself. Hard to sleep with a noise like that goin' on. All day those waddies o' his don't seem to do no work at all, just lay around the ranch. Bill tells me his boys work in shifts, roundin' up the cattle an' doin' the horse-breakin' an' sech.

"Couple times when I stayed at Ike's ranch overnight an' the next mornin' headed for Fairwater, the railroad's shippin' town beyond Rimrock . . .. by the way, Jesse, maybe you don't know but Fairwater lays at the other end of Rimrock, with Rimrock between Red Rock an' Fairwater . . . well, Ike's got a short-cut through the mountains right by his ranch-house, it brings you out at the head of town near the loadin' pen an' every time I start for the short-cut Bill would steer me onto the main road with one excuse or another. He wouldn't let me take the cut. Seems kinda funny to me, that's all."

They reached Cole Mathers' ranch and Jesse, after looking the stock over, bought three hundred head and made arrangements for their delivery. It was getting late and Mathers wanted him to stay over night. "No can do, Mister Mathers; thanks, but I gotta be gettin' back."

"You won't get lost goin' back, Jesse," Cole said, on parting. "Just keep to the main road all the way and it will lead you right to Rimrock. Colt's Neck Creek follows alongside the road all the way, so if you do get off the road find the creek an' follow it right along."

Jesse thanked him and went on his way. He rode slowly, his mind busy with the various things he had heard. "Ike Taylor must know I'm in this section," he mused, "an' Ike should have taken action long ago. Things were too peaceful." The hatred for the Taylors he had never let grow cold, and he had been hoping that Ike Taylor would start something. It certainly was strange that the Taylors hadn't done anything about Shell Dubois or Pete Dane, and it wasn't possible that Ike Taylor had forgotten the name of Farmer.

"I Hear You're Fast With A Gun"

The feud had lasted too many years and all because, as Sheriff Higgins had said, Ike Taylor wanted Mike Farmer's ranch. But why should Taylor want a ranch so badly that he would frame a man for it? No, Ike Taylor would never forget the name of Farmer. But now Jesse was getting restless for action. "Damn it," Jesse mumbled, "I'll start the ball rolling." But first he must ask Sheriff Higgins more about his father.

Jesse pulled into Rimrock and stopped at Val Higgins' office. The sheriff wasn't in, but Jesse decided to make the rounds and look for him. He dropped the gelding's reins in front of the First Chance

saloon and walked through the batwing doors. As he entered, the noise and confusion of those drinking and gambling stopped instantly. "Gunswift Farmer!" someone whispered. Jesse overheard the muttered whisper. So, he thought, they were calling him Gunswift. He was getting a reputation. His eyes took in those standing at the bar and he saw, half way down, a drink in his left hand, and a mocking grin on his face, Bill Taylor. Taylor's face was flushed from drink. He saw Jesse and called out, "I was just sayin', Mister Farmer, that you seem to have a rep for bein' a fast draw artist. They call you Gunswift Farmer around here." Jesse saw that Bill Taylor had had just enough to drink to make him tough.

"Haven't heard," Jesse answered, as he walked up to the bar.

"Me," Taylor continued, "I'm thinkin' you're not so fast as they claim."

"Listen, hombre. I'll be the fastest until a faster one comes along. I'm not lookin' for trouble with you, Bill Taylor, but you're talkin' outa turn an' I can accommodate if necessary."

Jesse's answer was tinged with irony, and as he spoke he stopped and faced Bill Taylor squarely. Suddenly there was a cleared space around Bill Taylor. He put his glass of liquor on the bar and the muscles of his jaw were throbbing convulsively. The fingers of his right hand started to pluck nervously at the top of his gun-belt, just over the gun that hung on his right thigh. His left hand was brushing something from his left shoulder. Suddenly from somewhere in the room a man screamed out, "Watch that left hand of his, Farmer, the gun's a fake; he uses a knife." The words were hardly uttered when Bill Taylor's left hand became a blur of speed. A silvery streak of light shot through the air. Taylor had thrown his knife. Jesse fired and Bill Taylor sagged against the bar. The knife just missed his throat. His body suddenly crumpled and he was dead before he hit the floor. Jesse Farmer, with smoking gun still in his hand, backed slowly to the door and turning suddenly he sprang through and disappeared into the night. In the First Chance saloon a dance hall girl laughed hysterically and from outside came the thundering hoof-beats of a horse galloping away.

Five minutes later Sheriff Val Higgins came stamping into the First Chance. "Who did it?" he asked a cowboy. "Gunswift Farmer," came the reply.

Immediately Val Higgins whirled about and hurried out. Then a second galloping horse was heard following the first. Val knew he could never catch Jesse Farmer's big gelding, so he slowed down to a lope. Arriving at Farmer's ranch Val looked around but could find no trace of Jesse. There was only one other place he would go, Val figured, to Taylor's ranch for a clean-up.

Jesse Farmer kept the big gelding at full gallop. Jesse only slowed when he had passed his ranch and started to come to the road which turned off and led to Ike Taylor's Box B spread. Jesse came to the fork, turned left and continued on at a fast walk, and soon in the distance he saw lights gleaming. "That's the ranch-house, I guess," Jesse muttered. "I better go careful from now on. This is showdown and I can't afford to take chances."

A short distance from the lights he pulled up and listened for any unnatural noises. There was nothing to be heard but a dull thumping sound. Swinging down from the saddle, Jesse ground-hitched Sungold and then proceeded on foot. As he came closer he saw a long, low, dark bulk to the left of the house where the lights were shining. Trodding softly towards this, he saw that it was a bunk-house. A light shone from within through a chink in the wall.

Jesse edged up until he could put his

eye to the crack and look in. There were rows of board bunks, one beside the other against the wall, but the long, low-ceilinged room was empty. Jesse thought this strange. After the day's work the cowhands should be in there playing cards or perhaps just sitting around, but everything was quiet and empty. Easing himself away and crouching low, he edged toward the light coming from what he judged was the house. Just then the moon came out from behind a bank of clouds and Jesse, as he dropped flat to the ground, saw everything more plainly.

The house also was long and low and as he lay now Jesse was facing the front porch. The rear of the house nestled closely against the side of a mountain. Jesse guessed it was Beaver Mountain that Val Higgins had told him about. Val had told him that there was gold there at one time. Suddenly the moon disappeared and Jesse was again enveloped in darkness. He had noticed that the light shining through the darkness had come from a window in the bottom floor around the right side of the porch.

In a second Jesse had leaped up and with a few steps was under the window. Taking off his big Stetson he raised himself on tiptoe and looked in. The room he saw was a large bedroom. One door faced him. To the right of the door, in a far corner, was a bed. Beside the bed, reading from a lamp on a small desk, a man was sitting in a wheel-chair.

Jesse noticed that the window was slightly open at the bottom, and taking a good grip he flung it open all the way, and with gun out he climbed into the room. The aged hulk in the wheel-chair looked up Jesse cat-footed over to the chair and turning so that he could keep the window and door in his line of vision, he pointed the gun. "Ike Taylor?" he asked.

The old man replied in a whisper, "Yes, I'm Ike Taylor."

"My name's Farmer, Jesse Farmer. I'm Mike Farmer's son, the man you framed. Do you recall the name?"

The sunken eyes lighted up for a moment when Jesse mentioned the name of Farmer. "I never framed Mike Farmer," he said. "You got the wrong man, son."

"You lie," Jesse said. "You framed him; then killed him, and I'm here to kill you and all your breed."

Ike Taylor shook his head. "You're wrong, son," he repeated. "Before you go killing anybody, I'll tell you a story."

"Make it short, old man," Jesse replied.

Ike Taylor closed his eyes and started to talk. "Forty-five years ago," he said, "Mike Farmer, myself and Val Higgins came to this country. We were only kids. Ten years later your pop an' me had this ranch an' was doin' good. Val Higgins was sheriff of the county as he is today. One day during a storm there was a landslide on the mountain in back of this house and your Dad discovered gold in the loosened earth. We told Val about it and then started to take the gold out. A year later we were pretty rich."

Ike Taylor stopped a moment and gazed into space as if visioning the scenes all over again. Then he continued, "One day your pop went away, and when he came back he brought along a wife. She was a beautiful woman, son, but a month later I caught Val one day trying to get Mike Farmer's girl to leave Mike and go away with him. We had a gun battle and Val beat me. His bullet paralyzed me so that I couldn't move or talk. Val told your pop that I had been shot by a drunken cowboy. He believed him as there was no witnesses. Then you were born an' ten years later your pop was framed an' sent to jail. He died, and since then Val Higgins has owned this ranch.

"Bill an' Ike Taylor ain't my sons; they

are Higgins' sons. He forced your mother to marry him after Mike was framed, an' then after giving birth to Bill an' Ike Higgins she died. Val sent you away to some Mexican friends of his below the border an' paid them to keep tellin' you that I framed your pop. He kept me locked up here paralyzed, but the years are helping me, son, an' I can talk an' move a little. He don't know that, but I was waitin' for the day when I would be well enough to call him for what he did an' kill him.

"Val Higgins killed your father, son, not me. Higgins framed him an' all these years he's been takin' out gold that rightfully belongs to Mike an' me, but now being your pop's dead, it's yours. Higgins takes the gold from a tunnel that he made through the cellar of this house into the mountain. He brings it out an' ships it to Fairwater in small boxes, which he carts with a wagon through the short-cut he has on the ranch here. No one has ever found that out.

"Jesse, son, I hope you're believin' every word I'm sayin'. Val Higgins has his men diggin' by lantern-light every night. They dig gold until he has plenty of money. Then they stop until he needs some more. The veins never seem to run out. That gold can't last forever an' I have the real title to the ranch an' it's ours. I can prove it. You're Mike Farmer's son. Are you goin' to let Val Higgins steal what by right is yours?" Jesse suddenly had an answer now to all the things about which he had been in doubt. But, he thought, suppose Ike was lying.

Ike Taylor was about to speak again when suddenly there was the beat of hoofs outside. "If this is Val Higgins, watch out, Jesse. I'm the only one knows it, but Sheriff Val Higgins is the fastest gunman in these parts; so if this is him watch out."

Jesse nodded and returned to his holster the gun he had been holding. He hoped Val was fast, but it would be an even break. Ike and Jesse heard the chink cook say, as he open the door, "Come light in, Mist' Higgins." Then Higgins was heard to say, "Have any visitors tonight, Ling?" "No, Mist' Higgins, no bloddy come." "All right, Ling," Higgins answered, "I'll see Ike anyway."

Then Jesse heard footsteps coming towards the door that led into Ike Taylor's bedroom. It swung open and Sheriff Val Higgins stepped in. He saw Jesse.

"Farmer," he said, "how did you get here?"

"Through that window," Ike Taylor said, softly, before Jesse could reply.

Higgins swung swiftly towards the wheel-chair. "Gawd, Ike, you talking?" This in a very surprised manner.

"You're damn right I kin talk, Val Higgins, an' I did, you dirty killer." Val Higgins' face began to lose color. It became a pasty white. He began to tremble.

"You told Jesse everything?" he croaked.

Ike nodded. "I won't deny anything," he said, watching Jesse closely. "I'm through in this part of the country, anyway. But Bill Taylor was my son, Jesse Farmer. You killed him, an' before I leave I'll kill you for that an' then I'll make buzzard's meat of this old fool Ike Taylor."

Then a mad lust to kill came over Jesse. "Draw, you skunk," Jesse flung out, white with rage. He was watching Higgins closely, and saw the killer flame leap into his eyes. Then they drew. Jesse felt a burn on his left arm, and then he saw his bullet tear away a part of Val Higgins' throat. A second bullet from Jesse's flaming .45 entered Higgins' forehead. Sheriff Higgins fell to the floor dead. It was all over.

"Gawd, boy," Ike breathed, "he almost got you."

"Yea," Jesse said, huskily, "he was kinda fast."

SHOW-DOWN

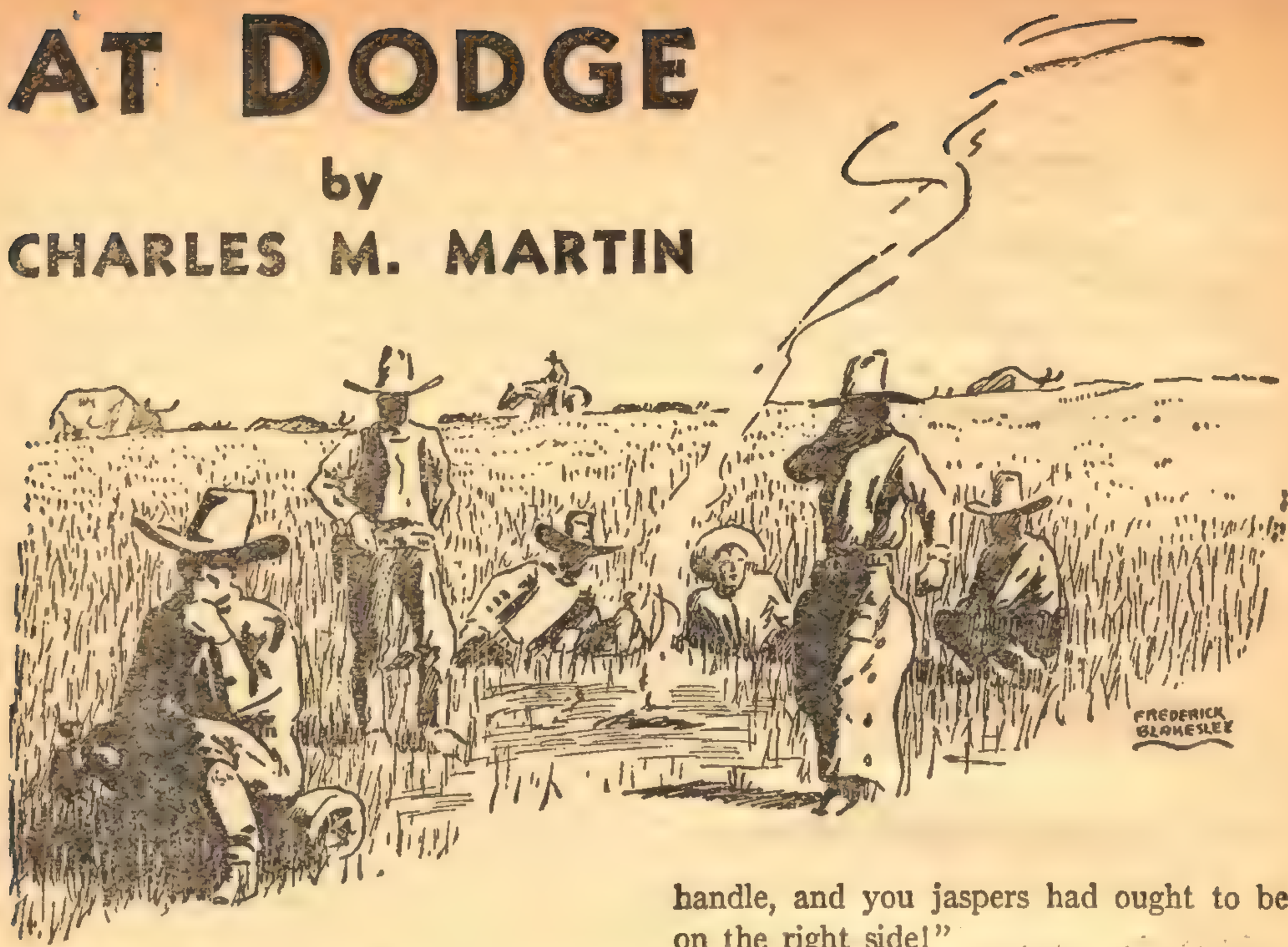
A ROARING TRAIL HERD NOVEL

The old cook twisted and fired just as the rattler struck.

AT DODGE

by

CHARLES M. MARTIN



Colt Travers watched the tossing heads of three thousand Texas long-horns that were held on the bunching grounds just out of Amarillo. Trail-herd for Dodge City eager to be on the move, and most of his men taking a last fling at the flesh-pots before starting the hard drive. The young Ramrod glanced at the handful of men holding the herd, and turned his horse toward town. Loud shouts greeted his ears when he slid from the saddle in front of the Long Horn saloon. Inside the batwings, Travers stopped suddenly when he heard his name mentioned contemptuously.

"Let that tin-badge Colt Travers drive his own dogies to Dodge," a hawk-faced man was telling three staggering punchers. "There's hell across that Oklahoma Panhandle, and you jaspers had ought to be on the right side!"

Colt Travers relaxed against the wall. He had served as deputy sheriff for three of his twenty-four years until the death of his father had left him owner of the C bar T.

"We're drawing fighting wages to make the drive," one of his cowboys answered. "Yo're playing a dif'funt game from us, Snake Matson. We done promised Colt we'd see him through to Dodge."

Snake Matson draped his lean length sinuously across the bar. He waved his hand to the bartender, and filled the four glasses from the bottle that slid to a stop at his elbow. The three C bar T waddies watched with the detached air of those who drink with the one who is paying the bill, without being overly fond of the payer. Snake Matson's thin face was cunning as he leaned closer, glass in hand.

The Price For Driving A Herd Through The Strip Was The Herd Itself—At Least That Was What A Certain Gent Tried To Collect When He Heard The Owl Hoot

"I'm giving you a tip," he began confidentially. "Not many herds get across that Panhandle, and dang few Drovers reaches Dodge City. For why? Because she's a free country, and cattle in them parts is free for the taking!"

The oldest of the three punchers straightened up and pushed his liquor away. His long handle-bar mustaches worked up and down as he talked in a drawling angry voice, and his two younger companions watched drunkenly while they swayed against the bar.

"I'd puke yore rotten liquor up if I could," he shouted. "I punched for ole Charley Travers on the C bar T, an' now I'm drawing riding pay and fighting wages from young Colt. We're going through to Dodge, and Gawd help th' wide-looping rustler what tries to spook that herd!"

Colt Travers saw Snake Matson drop, his left hand down to his gunbelt. He knew that Dallas Turner feared neither man nor beast, but he also knew that the old puncher was too drunk for a fast draw and straight shooting. The young Texan stepped forward to face Snake Matson as he swept Dallas to one side with his left arm. Matson looked up with a slow sneer.

"You lose something?" he asked contemptuously.

"Nothing," Colt Travers answered quietly. "But I heard yore wawa, and I was just waiting to find out was I going to lose three good men. Yo're a snake, Matson, and th' brand fits you skin-tight!"

"Two years ago you told me that same thing when you was packing th' star," Matson answered slowly, and there was an eager expression of anticipation on his thin face. "Now she's different. You say I'm a snake?"

"Side-winder," Travers agreed calmly. "Th' kind what strikes without giving warning."

"Me or Diamond neither one thinks yo're so fast with a cutter," Matson sneered.

"Mebbe not, but that brother of yores was named after a snake, too," the cattleman answered quietly. "Diamond-back rattler; th' kind what serves notice before he does his stuff!"

"Jest a minute, boss," Dallas Turner interrupted. "This yere short-horn was tellin' us that Diamond had done served notice that th' C bar T trail-herd won't get across the Strip. He was offering us a cut to throw in with him."

The tall Texan controlled himself with an effort as he stared into the sneering face of Snake Matson. He had won the name of "Colt" because of his ability to back up his arguments with either of the two long-barreled Peace-makers tied low on his high-cuffed Levis. His lips formed a straight line of determination as he stepped back a pace with hands hooked in his crossed gunbelts.

"Yo're drunk," he said to Matson. "Or you wouldn't be talking so much with yore mouth. My herd goes to Dodge, an' I'll meet Diamond there if not before. Now get out of my way before I step on yore tail and scotch you!"

Snake Matson leaned forward in a crouch while his little black eyes blazed venomously. His right hand hovered above the bone handle of his .45 while he pushed the droopy Stetson to the back of his head with a sweep of his left.

"You sent Diamond up to th' Pen for a stretch back there aways," he snarled. "With me it's different. You ain't even going to start that drive!"

Anger flashed across the stern face of the C bar T Ramrod as he went into devastating action. Both hands plunged down to the worn cedar handles of his guns when Snake Matson made a downward thrust for his Colt. Colt Travers' hands made a smooth swiveling roll as the right-hand gun cleared the holster-lip to cover the lathy rustler in the studded bull-hide chaps. His

left hand flashed up and across as the heavy barrel crashed against the gunman's face with a swipe that broke the long nose and spattered a handful of buck teeth in the sawdust on the floor.

Snake Matson went down on his back with a scream as the gun jumped from his clutching fingers and slid across the greasy floor. Old Dallas Turner was crouching over his guns to cover a pair of bearded saddle-tramps along the wall who dropped hands to their holstered guns. Colt Travers holstered his left-hand gun as he spoke sharply to the man on the floor.

"Crawl on yore belly, you dang snake. You asked for it, an' yo're lucky I didn't smoke you down. Git going, fellers!"

the Strip; that unclaimed part of Oklahoma between Texas and Kansas. Dallas Turner and his two companions were riding in the drag with bandannas up over their faces to keep out the dust-fog thrown up by the hoofs of the three thousand Texas long-horns. Two half-grown boys of sixteen handled the cavvy of more than a hundred wiry mustangs until old Dallas sobered up, after which they would again become "buttons."

An early camp was made at a small stream about four o'clock and Colt Travers smiled for the first time when he saw smoke rolling from the trench-fire above the cooky's dutch ovens. He could smell the tempting odors of son-of-a-gun-in-a-

Trouble Sends A Messenger

Dallas Turner reached down and picked up the fallen gun. He broke the weapon and spilled the shells into a brass spittoon, after which he threw the gun in after the shells. Then he followed the two young cowboys through the swinging doors while Colt Travers backed to the opening.

"I never kill a drunk," Travers stated clearly. "The next time I see you will be th' last, Snake. I'm warning you now not to cut my sign!"

He slid through the door while hardened gun-fighters avoided his glance. Old Dallas Turner was in the saddle with gun covering the door as Travers swept the trailing reins from the ground and mounted his tall roan. A dust cloud followed the four as they spurred away to the holding grounds where the trail-herd was bellowing to be on the move.

Colt Travers made no mention of the incident in the saloon as he told off men to ride at point and swing. The chuck wagon had left hours before with the bedrolls of the fourteen men who would make the long drive across the north-western Texas Panhandle. From there stretched

sack, but he knew better than to approach the crotchety old cook who took no slack from anyone when he was on the trail. To his surprise old Hardtack Riley called to him in an almost cheerful voice.

"Found this yere on a stake there by th' crick," he muttered without looking up from the steaming iron pots of mulligan. "Thought mebbe you'd want to keep it under yore hat."

Colt Travers took the dirty card from Riley's left hand. A piece of snake-skin was attached to the card. One Diamond in dirty yellow showed on the skin, with twelve rattles and a button hanging to one end. They rattled dryly when the C bar T Ramrod turned the card to read the scrawling writing:

> Colt Travers: I got other bizness or i wood see you now. After yore through with yore trail herd i will be seein you in the last chance in Dodge pervidin you last that long.
>
> DIAMOND MATSON.

"Why keep this here under my hat?" Travers asked Riley. "Looky, Hardtack."

The rheumatic old cook glanced up, and his squinting eyes stared when Travers took

off his five gallon Stetson and fastened the skin and rattles on the band. Colt grinned when he settled the hat on the back of his curly head.

"You shore that's good luck?" Hardtack asked anxiously. "Yo're bound to attract reptiles with that there skin, boss."

"Feed the boys up good tonight," Travers whispered. "I got to make war talk, and don't forget, Hardtack, that an army travels on its stomach."

"They'll eat good while there's grub in th' wagon," Hardtack promised. "But looky, Colt; better you send old Dallas Turner on ahead to scout water. Them rustlers is ahead of us right now!"

"Good idea," Travers agreed thoughtfully. "I'll put old Tucson Jones to wranglin' the cavvy with them two buttons of his."

As he moved away to strip the riding gear from his horse, the voice of Hardtack Riley shouted above all other noises. "Come an' git it afore I throws it out!"

The cattle were in the creek as a dozen men gigged their tired horses toward the chuck wagon. Three men guarded the herd which would be bedded down on the flat after the cowboys had wolfed their meal. Tin plates were snatched from the tail-gate table for Hardtack to fill. Hunkered down on high boot-heels, the dusty riders knocked the rough edges off their day-old appetite in preparation for Hardtack's son-of-a-gun-in-a-sack. No one ever wanted to eat right away after a day spent in Amarillo.

Silence for a while except for the rattle of knives on plates, and when the satisfied cowboys began to reach for the makin's, Colt Travers rapped on his plate with the handle of his knife.

"Every man rides from now on with a gun on his leg," he began. "There's a nest of snakes just ahead of us."

"You mean Matson's crowd, boss?" Dallas Turner asked.

Travers nodded, and the rattles on his hat-band attracted the eyes of every man in the crew. Before he could speak again, Hardtack Riley shouted hoarsely, and the gun in his gnarled hand belched smoke and flame. When the cowboys ran toward him, the old cook reached into a pile of mesquite roots. Then he held up the five-foot body of a writhing snake, minus most of the flat head.

"I'll say they's snakes," the old cooky growled. "Something dang funny about this one, too!"

"String on his tail," Dallas Turner shouted. "With the other end tied to a chunk of greasewood!"

"She's a plant," Hardtack declared positively. "I thought they was a ketch when I see that pile of wood all stacked up waitin' fer me to use."

"Skin that snake and nail his hide on the side of yore wagon," Travers grinned. "Like I was telling you rannies before there's snakes ahead of us."

"Thirteen rattles and a button," Hardtack growled. "I hope we get one of Matson's rustlers for every rattle on that there disappointed diamond-back yonder. Ketch holt, Dallas; we're gonna turn him outside in."

Dallas Turner spit on his hands as Hardtack cut the head off even and started a slit in the snake's hide. Dallas took a handful of sand and held the neck while the old cook stripped off the diamond-back hide like a woman taking off a tight stocking. Hardtack poured salt into the skin while Dallas held it dangling, after which Colt Travers recalled the men at their work.

"Four men on night herd," he began, pointing off the riders. "And after this there won't be no more slinging yore gun-belts in th' chuck wagon. You better sweat a li'l more from th' extra weight than to need a gun an' not have one handy."

"You ain't speakin' none about me, Colt," the old wrangler answered. "Me; I'd

feel plumb nekked without my hardware."

"Yeah," Travers grinned. "So starting tomorrow you can pack yore saddle-gun in the boot under yore leg too. I want you to scout ahead to spot good feed an' water. An keep yore eyes skinned for snakes."

"But who's gonna wrangle th' cavvy?" Dallas asked.

"Tucson Jones an' them two kids of his can hold the horse herd," Travers answered. "Now let's get out there and bed them critters down. Then you boys better turn in, 'cause we're hitting out come daybreak."

A SIDE-WINDER STRIKES

The trail-herd moved slowly along with old Dallas Turner riding ahead to hunt good bed-ground and water. Travers wanted to keep the cattle fleshed up because of the better prices they would bring in Dodge City. The men were riding with sixguns on their legs and carbines in saddle-boots as they moved into low hilly country five days out from Amarillo.

Water was becoming more scarce and farther apart as the slow-moving herd pushed into the hills, and Colt Travers left his position at left point and rode ahead to meet Dallas Turner. The drive was a huge dust cloud behind him when a faint popping sounded ahead. Travers put spurs to the tall roan and raced forward, and his face was hard when the sound of rifles grew louder. He stopped at the top of a small rise to look over a little valley, and then he was out of the saddle. Ground-tying the roan, he crept forward on foot, keeping the rocks between himself and the floor of the little valley.

Old Dallas was behind a flat boulder with his sixguns thrust out ahead of him. His horse was down on his left side some distance away, and Travers could see the short saddle-gun under the leather. Three men were centering their fire on the old wrangler from three different points. Travers slipped swiftly forward behind jutting rocks, and he paused to peer out when the guns of Dallas stopped booming. The old cowboy was flat on the ground, and the three men were coming out from behind their barricades to finish what they had started.

Colt Travers jerked his guns when he recognized Snake Matson and the two men who had tried to back the rustler's gunplay in the saloon at Amarillo. One of the strangers was aiming at the shoulder of the old wrangler where it stuck out from the rock.

Brang! The stranger dropped when Travers snapped a shot from his right hip. The other gunman wheeled and threw a shot from each hand before Travers dropped him with a bullet from his left-hand gun. Snake Matson tried to turn to face the tall Texan.

"Drop that iron and claw sky! Pronto, before I drop you!"

He walked forward when the rustler dropped his gun and elevated both hands. Snake Matson turned slowly to face Travers who stopped ten paces away. He sneered when he recognized the rattles on the cattleman's hat.

"So you got Diamond's card?"

"I'm keeping it," Travers answered shortly. "Until such time as I can pin it on his worthless carcass!"

"That jasper pulled down on us," Matson snarled. "Killed one of my men back yonderly a ways!"

"Yo're a liar," the young trail boss growled deep in his throat. "Ole Dallas wasn't afraid of you and yore rustlers in a bunch, and I heard that rifle-shooting from back the other side of th' rise. Now yo're short a couple wide-looping hands because they had more sand than savvy."

"Yo're only a kid," Snake Matson sneered. "You can't beat me an' Diamond, and I was only trying to keep them cow-

boys of yores from gettin' killed. That's th' reason we left that warning back there in the wood pile."

"Yeah; with a string on his tail so he couldn't get away," Travers agreed. "You figgered on killing old Hardtack so we'd have to rustle us up another cook, but right now the hide of that snake is hanging on th' wagon just as a reminder!"

He shook his head angrily to set the rattles whirring on his hat-band. The little black eyes narrowed to slits in the rustler's face as his thin shoulders drooped forward, and Colt Travers smiled with the corners of his mouth when he deliberately holstered his guns. He glanced aside at the still body of Dallas Turner, and Snake Matson saw his chance and took it. His right hand struck down for the gun on his leg; drew swiftly to cover the young trail boss as his thin lips snapped an order.

"Move and I'll drill you center!"

Colt Travers jerked his eyes back from the huddled figure of old Dallas. Snake Matson sneered with triumph as his finger tightened on the trigger of his gun; showed yellow teeth in a grin as the young Texan raised his hands shoulder high.

"Draw them guns careful-like with th' grips toward me," he shouted. "Make one funny move and I'll send a slug into yore ticker for what I owe you!"

"Come an' take 'em," Travers drawled quietly. "I know your breed. You aim to shoot me down regardless without taking a chance."

"Smart feller," the rustler sneered. "Draw them guns and hand 'em over grips first before I squeeze trigger!"

Colt Travers lowered his arms slowly; drew his two guns gingerly and reversed the long barrels until they pointed toward his lean waist. Then he extended them to Snake Matson with a scowl of disappointment on his young face. The rustler reached forward to take the heavy weapons; dropped the muzzle of his gun when his left hand touched the worn handles.

Colt Travers flipped his wrists with a jerk too fast for the eye to follow, and the heavy guns swiveled in a circle to jump the worn handles against his rope-burned palms. His fingers had been through the trigger guards all the time, and the heavy guns bounced in his hands when the double explosion roared sullenly to shock Snake Matson back on his heels.

Matson coughed and slid to his knees as the gun fell from his nerveless fingers; fell backward with a rattle in his throat as his long legs twitched and straightened out. Colt Travers holstered his guns and hurried to the old jingler's side. He stopped with a frown of surprise when he saw Dallas sitting up with his back to a rock, and the old wrangler was grinning as though he were enjoying a joke.

"You ain't dead, Dallas, old settler?"

"Naw," Dallas denied. "Uh sliver of rock slapped me on th' skull and knocked me out for a minute. When I come to and sees you had Snake Matson under yore gun, I just laid still to keep you from gettin' a fool idea of taking him prisoner. You ain't a depitty no more, Colt."

"I thought he had killed you," Travers whispered slowly. "You dang old warthawg. You made me get my mad up and kill ourselves a man!"

"Shore," Dallas agreed brazenly. "We should have gone about our snake-killin' some time back. I knew you'd scotch that reptile if you thought he had smoked me down three to one, so I just laid back and played possum. Now there's four dead snakes what won't bother us no more!"

"You shoot a gent back yonder?" Travers asked.

"I shore as hell did," Dallas answered viciously. "Th' skunk was salting a water hole with pizen, and I cut down on him before I thought twice. Then Snake cut down on me with that .30-30 of his, and he hit my hoss. So I hunted me a hole

behind that rock an' made myself thin. It wasn't a very big rock."

"About this nest of snakes," Travers grunted. "Don't seem decent to let 'em lay."

Old Dallas grinned maliciously. "Ahead yonder a mile is bed-ground for tonight," he answered. "Let that crew of ours boot-hill these jaspers while th' herd is drinking. Throw 'em at the bottom of that cut-back yonder, an' cut th' bank down on top of 'em. Me; I'd let the buzzards have 'em, but yo're roddin' the layout!"

"You feel alright now?" Travers asked.

"Fit as a bull-fiddle," the old wrangler

Trouble Town Has Visitors

answered with a grin. "Let's go meet the drive. I'll take Snake's hoss till we comes up with th' cavvy, and we can bury these rustlers later like I said."

They met Hardtack Riley about four miles ahead of the herd, and Dallas rode beside the heavy wagon while he told the old cook about the fight. Hardtack grunted as he rubbed his calloused palm on the grip of his old S.A. Colt .44.

"Got four of 'em, huh? That's four snakes we won't have to kill crossing th' Strip."

"Colt has got something on his mind," Dallas answered. "I seen his fingers itching ever' time them rattles on his hat sounded off."

"Looky, Dallas," Hardtack whispered tensely. "He aims to mebbe beat Diamond Matson to th' gun!"

"He can beat Diamond, but the herd has to make Dodge first," Dallas answered.

"Yo're slow-witted as well as fiddle-footed," the old cook growled. "If Colt rides into Dodge ahead of the herd and calls for show-down like that warning said, chances are they wouldn't be no raid while we're plowin' through that hell they calls th' Strip!"

"Hod dang! I bet yo're right," Dallas whispered loudly. "Looks like me an' him will be cutting on ahead come morning. Colt's as broncho as a fuzzy on a frosty morning, an' his eyes narrers down ever' time Diamond Matson's callin' card rattles on his Stetson."

"You an' him," Hardtack sneered. "Colt will have his hands full without looking out for a spavined old coot like you."

"Stand them braunks and step down off that seat," the old wrangler shouted. "You stove-up old pelican; I'll onlimber yore jints with a working over you won't forget noways soon!"

"I quit fighting with my fists when I was a yearlin'," Hardtack answered, but there was a bright twinkle in his faded old eyes. "Last time I fit a jasper, I stove my gun-hand up for a month."

"Yeah," Dallas jeered. "On my skull when me and you was peelin' fuzzies for th' old T Diamond hoss spread. Then I poured it on you till yore cinches parted. Only reason why I let up was because I run out of strength to work you over some more."

"After which I passed you my bottle of Forty-rod, an' we rubbed each other down with hoss linament," Hardtack chuckled. "Pard; that there fight was a dinger!"

"We're gettin' old, Hardtack," Dallas answered softly. "But we'd both bleed out for young Colt. He's a man like his Dad was. You think I better side him when he goes riding Dodge way?"

"You can't cook for shucks," Hardtack growled softly. "But if you don't rub stirrups with Colt on this yere *pasear*, old and spavined as I am, I'll do 'er myself. Here

he comes back to tell us about his medicine. He's done got it all thunked out."

Both old timers bit chunks from their eating plugs as Colt Travers rode up on the tall roan. Hardtack spat carelessly over the rim of the front wheel while his scarred boot found the brake, and he looked up with assumed surprise when the C bar T Ramrod neck-reined close to the creaking wagon.

"You two old raw-hiders got the sign all read?" he asked.

"Sign? What you mean, boss?" Dallas asked innocently.

Colt Travers grinned slowly as he shook his head to make the rattle talk. He rubbed his right palm on the butt of his gun while he stared at the two old gun-dogs. It was Dallas who broke first and grinned.

"Yeah, Colt," he admitted slowly. "Me and my old saddle-pard done read yore sign. When we startin' for Dodge?"

"*We* ain't," Travers answered sharply. "I'm playing it a lone hand, and yo're to rod the trail-herd till I get back. I figure we can stop that raid in the Strip if I call for showdown first. Means thirty thousand to me!"

"Partly correct," Dallas interrupted. "All except the promise I done made old Charley Travers, yore Pappy. Two years ago just before he took th' long one-way trail, he made me promise to side you when the odds was more than even. So when is you and me hitting out for th' Last Chance in Dodge?"

"I can rod the drive," Hardtack put in. "Them rannies either does what I tells them to do, or they don'teat. A army travels on its stummick. Better you two drag yore loops come sun-up tuhmorrow!"

"That's settled then," Dallas chuckled triumphantly. "We'll clean our guns good tonight, and grain them hosses for a fast trip. Take us two days steady riding to make Dodge."

"I aimed to play her alone," Travers grumbled. "But I might need your guns at my back at that, you danged old nursemaid. Graze them steers along slow-like, Hardtack. And pick Pecos Taylor to scout water and grass. Me and Dallas will be back a week tomorrow."

"Mebbe," the old cook growled. "But scotch that nest of Diamond-backs while yo're about yore snake killin'. Giddap hosses!"

FREE COUNTRY

Colt Travers and Dallas were a day away from the trail-herd before the C bar T cowboys knew about the sudden trip to Dodge City. Every man in the crew would have fought for the chance to go along, and the old wrangler grinned when he and his young boss made camp on the bank of a little stream.

He watched the tall Texan check his guns, and twice Travers completed the Road-agent's spin with fingers through the trigger guard. Many a man had shot himself in the stomach since John Wesley Harden had introduced the trick to the Texas drovers, but Colt Travers had perfected the movement until he could work it with both hands.

"I was watchin' you back yonder when you holstered yore irons," Dallas remarked slowly. "You did that on purpose, Colt."

"Th' feller was guilty, but I couldn't take no prisoners," the Texan answered casually. "I figured you was dead, so I give him a chance and he took it."

"Yeah," Dallas agreed. "He was going to make himself safe by taking yore guns first, after which he aimed to kill you just th' same. If it's all one to you, Colt, don't take no more fool chances like that. I'm gettin' kinda old, and it makes me jumpy as a boogered steer."

They cooked their simple meal before twilight. There would be no fire after dark because Travers insisted that they were in snake country, and that it would be

healthier to take precautions. With a single blanket and slicker to cover them, and with their saddles for pillows, both men went to bed "standing up" by merely pulling off their boots.

The next day they overtook a trail-herd just before noon. The young trail boss insisted on swinging wide to avoid the shouting drovers who were pushing the herd along at a fast walk, instead of the usual grazing gait. The old wrangler growled a low warning when two riders left their positions at right point and cut away from the herd to intercept them. Dallas loosened the sixguns in his holsters, and grinned when he saw Colt Travers doing the same. A hand-gun has a way of jamming down in the leather on a long ride, and both were too old in range lore to be slowed down by a cramped iron in case trouble rode up to meet them.

"Business must be good in this yere free country," Dallas remarked. "That's quite a sizeable trail-herd, and them steers is branded Figger 8 from down Dalhart way. That's Olin Ordway's iron, but th' jigger riding out to give us Howdy is Bull Frazer. He's Right-bower to Diamond Matson, an' th' skinny jasper with him is Two-gun Kinney; gun-hawk from Abilene."

"I know 'em both," Travers answered quietly. "Don't ride too close to me, Dallas. In case there's a ruckus, I'm taking Kinney. You say he's fast?"

"Neither one of them is snails," the old wrangler grunted. "But don't try that fool spin with Kinney, boss."

The two gunmen rode up as Dallas fanned out about two lengths away from Travers. Bull Frazer saw the move and grinned. His slender partner fixed his eyes on Colt Travers and never lowered his gaze. He took in the position of the two guns on the black bullhides; noted the worn handles toed-in for a quick draw. The big man spoke first.

"Howdy, gents," he greeted hoarsely. "You come far?"

"Quite a way," Dallas answered casually. "There's good short grass up thisaway!"

"Yeah, and she's free grazing," Frazer answered. "You see a trail-herd drifting into th' Strip back yonder about two days' ride?"

Dallas nodded his head to Frazer's question. "We seen a C bar T herd coming along easy-like," he answered carelessly. "Twenty men swung well out to let th' herd graze as they come, and from th' look of their gear they must be drawin' fightin' pay."

Frazer shrugged. "They ain't a crew on th' trail what ain't drawing fightin' pay," he answered. "She's a free country up yere in th' Strip; free for man and beast. Who's roddin' that C bar T drive?"

His slender partner interrupted to answer him. "This jigger is," he snapped from thin lips. "Meet Colt Travers; Ramrod of th' C bar T!"

"Thought mebbe you'd forgot me, Two-gun," Travers drawled quietly. "Long time no see you."

"You wasn't looking for me very hard," the gunman sneered. "I note plain that you ain't riding a star on yore vest no more."

Colt Travers smiled with his lips. "That's right; I ain't," he agreed. "Been most a year since I quit riding for th' law."

"An' mebbe you've heard that there ain't no law up here in th' Strip except what men makes for themselves," Bull Frazer added in his hoarse voice.

"That's fair enough for all hands," Colt Travers agreed quietly. "Sometimes it saves a lot of time and expense thataway."

Two-gun Kinney was staring at him with open hostility. Everything about the slender gunman seemed to breathe a silent threat, but the young Texan sat his saddle easily with thumbs hooked into the crossed gunbelts about his waist. It was

the same old story of gunman's jealousy; the unbearable canker of doubt centered on speed.

"I hear you caught Snake Matson down in yore country an' buffaloed him with a sixgun," Kinney snapped viciously, his snarling voice taut as a fiddle string. "You pistol-whupped him, and Snake is a pard of mine!"

Travers sighed. "That's as good an excuse as any," he answered calmly. "But here's a better one, Two-gun. I met Snake and a couple of his pards a few days back on th' drive. He poisoned a water hole, and th' three of them threw down on one of my men with long guns. He figgered she was a free country like you mentioned, so I bought chips and horned in on th' play."

"Yeah?" and the slender gunman stiffened as he sneered the word. "Like I said, Snake is a pard of mine. So what?"

The tall Texan shrugged expressively. "I'm still here," he pointed out. "Snake tried a gun-sneak, and we planted him under a hillside with his boots on."

Kinney crouched forward while his little eyes bored into the face of the C bar T Ramrod. His right hand hovered above the notched walnut grip of his .44 like a hawk's talon. Dallas and Frazer sat motionless; both waiting, both ready to draw aces in the four-handed game of death. It was still Two-gun Kinney's deal.

"Yo're a liar, but I taken up for Snake. Fill yore hand, you lyin' son!"

"Standing pat," Travers drawled. "I've been dealt a good hand, I'm satisfied, an' I'll play these!"

Thumbs still hooked in his gunbelts, his long fingers tapped the handles of the guns on his long legs. Kinney wasted no more time on conversation. The preliminaries had been observed as he knew them, and the hated Texan in front of him was just one more notch on the grip of his gun. Like the dart of a snake's head, his hands flicked down to slap the handles of his guns. The right hand of the Texan moved with a flicking stroke like a cat's paw. His wrist swiveled in a half-turn when his fingers slapped the familiar butt with thumb dogging the hammer back at the end of the arc. Pale flame blossomed from the muzzle in the center of a smoke-puff, and the half-drawn gun flew from Kinney's fingers as he was shocked back over the cantle board of his high saddle.

Bull Frazer snapped his huge right hand down in a desperate effort to take advantage before Colt Travers could swing around and cock the hammer. The C bar T Ramrod chopped a shot with a downward sweep; flexed his steely wrist to bring the gun in line again when it bucked in his hand. Old Dallas Turner blinked when the big man spilled sideways from the saddle as though a mighty hammer had struck him. The old wrangler let his own gun slog back into leather with a grunt of disappointment as he turned to his young boss.

"I marked him out for my meat," he complained in an injured voice.

"I had it to do, old-timer," Travers explained quietly. "He started to throw down on me before Two-gun hit th' ground. Now you quirt up that rack of bones yo're straddlin'. We got to fog it out of here pronto before them other raiders of Matson's gets too close."

Dallas flung a quick glance at the spurring riders from the long trail-herd. His heels kicked back as he rolled steel to his horse, and the two were off across the flats with a half-mile lead. A Sharps buffalo gun roared behind them, and Travers spurred the tall roan into a swift lope while he measured the speed of the pursuers.

"They can't catch us," he said carelessly. "And even that old Sharps won't carry this far. Most of them will have to stick with the herd, so th' best they can do is send a rider on to warn Diamond Matson. Fair enough, Dallas?"

"It don't seem right," the old wrangler complained. "I've knowed old Olin Ordway for a long spell of time, an' Diamond Matson has raided that O bar O herd shore as hell. Like as not they killed th' old man, because Olin wouldn't give in without a ruckus. We had a couple of th' boys, we could make it tough for them jiggers, Colt."

He slid from the saddle as his left hand pulled the old Spencer carbine from the saddle-scabbard. Then he was on his belly lining up the sights when a racing figure left the main body of the pursuers and cut across to the northwest. Dallas pulled the trigger and watched his shot. The racing horse stumbled and fell to throw his rider far over his head into a looping roll.

"Teach 'em to have proper respect for Texans," Dallas chuckled. "What you say, boss?"

"Good shootin'," Colt Travers praised. "Now you hit that saddle so's we can put distance between us an' them. We got to find a place to camp pretty soon, an' we're going to have to eat cold."

"My eyes is throwing off a bit on me," Dallas apologized. "I should have hit that ranny instead of his hoss."

They rode in silence until they reached the bank of a little stream where they made a fireless camp. Twice during the night Dallas raised up to listen to the hoof beats of galloping horses, and he spoke of the matter while frying bacon at sun-up. Colt Travers merely nodded his head and continued to saddle the tall roan. After which he seated himself beside the little blaze and proceeded to clean the two long-barreled guns taken from his holsters.

"Who ever is rodding that Figger 8 drive must have sent word into Dodge," Dallas continued. "I hear a gent slidin' past like th' devil was riding his coat tails. Lucky we didn't have no fire."

Colt removed the cylinder from one of his guns, placed a thumb-nail back of the bore, and squinted down the barrel. Then he loaded the weapon with five shells, placing the hammer on an empty for safety. After eating cold beans, hot bacon and coffee, the two started for the line of low buildings in the distance that marked the fringe of Dodge City.

"Kinda early to hunt up yore date," Dallas remarked. "He won't be showing up in th' Last Chance until about second-drink time."

"That's time enough," Travers replied. "I want to see old Jake Curry down at the yards about that herd of ours. It never is too early to see old Jake."

"Looky yonder," Dallas exclaimed. "There's a sizeable river, Colt."

"That's th' Arkansas," Travers answered. "We got to cross that river before we hit Dodge, but there's a good ford at the lower end of town. You stick close when we reach Dodge, an' don't go maverickin' off on yore own. I picked you out to side me, old-timer, so I want you to keep yore head until we make arrangements for delivery and finishes our business. *Sabe, amigo?*"

"I get you," Dallas growled. "But just th' same I was figgerin' strong on jest one li'l shot of tarantular juice!"

FRONTIER LAW

The two Texans tied their horses at the hitch-rack in front of a dilapidated frame building at one end of the big holding corrals. Jake Curry came to the door, spat copiously in the dust, and waved a gnarled hand toward a pair of stave chairs inside the dingy office. Rugged as a blackjack post with the seasoned look of well-tanned whang leather, his drawling voice matched the air of calm sturdiness noticeable in his entire make-up.

"Light, gents, an' rest yore saddles. You came from down Taixas way from th' cut of yore riggin'."

"Amarillo," Travers answered. "Bringing up a trail-herd from the C bar T."

"You Colt Travers?" the old cattle buyer asked.

"The same," Travers answered.

"I done business with yore Paw a good many years," Curry said softly. "I heard as how he crossed th' Divide. Me n' old Charley Travers was good friends."

"We'll be driving three thousand head of long-horns into Dodge in a few days," Travers answered. "Prime beef running five-six year old, and no culls."

"Prime stock means they're holdin' their flesh," Curry answered. "But I done made a bid on that herd to yore trail boss."

"I'm roddin' the drive myself," Travers answered grimly. "Was my trail boss supposed to be Diamond Matson?"

"That's the gent," Curry answered with a frown. "Said his brother Snake made a deal with you to shove the herd through th' Strip on account of rustlers."

"Snake tried to make a deal like that back aways, with several of his riders to give force to his augerments," old Dallas interrupted dryly. "Fact is they got real persuasive, and we had to bury them under a cut-bank before we could win ourselves th' augerment that we was driving th' herd through our ownselves."

"You mean that Matson bunch was trying to twirl a wide loop?" the old cattle buyer asked sharply.

"Did you make a deal to take the Figger 8 stock from Matson?" Travers countered.

"Shore did," Curry answered promptly. "Matson had a letter from Olin Ordway to the effect that he was authorized to act for the Figger 8 for cash. Been me I'd have branded that stock O bar O instead of making a Figger 8 out of them two O's in his name. What you know about Ordway's herd?"

"Matson's long-riders are making the drive about two days back," Travers answered quietly. "They're short two hands now. Bull Frazer and Two-gun Kinney came over to make medicine when we was passing them wide, and there was gun-talk."

"Kinney was dealing, and Colt drew a pat hand and played what he got on the deal," Dallas explained dryly. "Colt had aces full, and he beat both their hands. Me; I drawed a good hand, but I never played my cards so good. Wasn't even openers. Colt win th' pot, and we lit a shuck when the rest of them drovers tried to buy chips in the game. Reckon they planted them two to keep 'em from pizening the kiyoties and buzzards!"

"He's The Fastest Man With A Gun In The Territory"

"Humm," Curry grunted thoughtfully. "That puts me in a tight with Diamond Matson. I can't near match him with a shootin' iron, but the offer I made him is off. Me and old Olin Ordway is pards like me and Charley Travers was. I'll do business with you, Colt Travers, in case I'm still alive when yore dogies come rollin' in. If I ain't, Jim Brown is yore next best bet. Jim is tight as all git out, but honest as oak."

"Colt has a date with Diamond Matson sometime this morning," Dallas remarked carelessly. "You see them rattles on Colt's J. B.?"

"Noticed 'em," Curry answered. "What a gent wears in the way of jim-cracks is his own business. Only them dang things makes me hunt my gun ever' time Colt shakes his head. I been bit twice by Diamond-backs, account of me being a mite hard of hearing when they warned me."

"Diamond sent that card to Colt with a invite to call for showdown when we hit Dodge," Dallas explained. "We figgered to save trouble by taking up the bids before we brings the C bar T herd into Dodge instead of after Matson's crew drove in."

"I've heard tell of you, Colt," Curry answered. "But Diamond Matson is the fastest gun-slicker in Dodge with the exception of mebbe Bill Tilighman, marshal. I'd suggest you see Bill and lay yore cards on the table."

"I'll play out my string," Travers answered quickly. "Bill Tilighman has troubles enough of his own without taking on my worries. Diamond Matson is the dealer, and I'll play these."

He patted the long-barreled Colts on his legs as he spoke. Then he unbuckled his gunbelts and removed the heavy bull-hide chaps. Hanging them on the back of a chair, he put the heavy cartridge-belt on again, and tied the moulded holsters low on the legs of his copper-riveted Levis. After which he eased the heavy guns in the leather and settled his Stetson firmly on the back of his head.

"Where's this here Last Chance?" he asked quietly.

"They's a big sign over th' walk you can't miss it," Curry answered. "Coming into town it reads First Chance on that side, and leaving town th' other side says Last Chance. You reckon you got a show agin Diamond Matson?"

"*Quien sabe?*" Colt Travers shrugged. "Who knows?"

"Me; I hain't what you might call religious," the old cattle buyer answered soberly. "But Charley Travers was a friend of mine just like Olin Ordway. Looks like Matson done Olin a meanness, and as the Mexas say: '*Vaya con Dios'!*"

"Go with God," Dallas interrupted under his breath. "Well; we'll be seeing you, Jake."

Dodge City was the end of the drive for the Texas trail-herds coming up through the Strip to Kansas markets. Crowds of bronzed cowboys crowded the streets and saloons, and no one paid any particular attention to the two Texans strolling along the board sidewalks. Dallas nudged his companion with his elbow as he jerked his head toward a huge sign hanging out over the sidewalk. Foot-high letters announced to the thirsty that here was their First Chance to irrigate the trail-dust from parched throats. Colt Travers glanced at the sign and whispered to the old wrangler.

"Go easy on the fire-water until we finishes our business. Remember how clost you come to the pearly gates that time in Amarillo when you got salty and went on th' prod agin Snake Matson."

Dallas tried unsuccessfully to swallow the lump in his throat. "I'll jest kinda gargle it around my tonsils to cut away th' first layer of alkili," he promised. "How you feeling, Colt?"

"Like always, with something else added," Travers replied grimly. "I got an itchin' pull in my trigger fingers, and I'd like to squeeze down slow-like the way you do when yo're testin' old licker agin th' back of yore tongue; if you know what I mean."

"I git you," Dallas answered. "Only she's always bottoms up with me, I like a good sudden jolt with th' tarantular juice burning all th' way down, and then I feels like I'm breathin' smoke and brimstone through my nose."

"You ever try a chaser?" Colt asked.

"You mean water?" the old wrangler gasped. "You mean a *Tejano* should spile good licker by waterin' it thataway?"

Colt Travers smiled gently when he saw that he had taken the nervous strain from the old gunman by diverting his mind. Without answering, he pushed through the swinging batwings with Dallas at his heels. The old cowboy stepped inside; then fell back against the front wall with knobby

hands hooked in his gunbelts. Colt Travers noticed this from the corner of his eye as he walked up to the long bar, and he knew the will-power his companion had exerted when his whole system was crying aloud for a drink. Four bartenders were serving the range-clad men who clamored loudly for more service.

His blue eyes wandered over the long room while he waited, and he gave his order when the bartender jerked his head back with eyebrows lifted inquiringly.

"Three-star!"

The bartender served him with noticeable respect. Three-Star Hennessy was a dollar a shot, while most of the cowboys were drinking barrel-goods made of Jamaica ginger, chewing tobacco, and cheap alcohol. You couldn't tell the difference after the third drink anyway, and a man had to be inured to hardships to hold down a riding job in any drovers' crew. He slid the pony glass along the smooth mahogany, and Travers nodded his head with silent approval when the glass came to rest within his cupped fingers. All he had to do was close his hand.

From the expression on his face, he might have been among friends in the Longhorn back in Amarillo where everybody knew everybody else. Dallas Turner was still in his position by the door, and old Jake Curry was halfway down the bar trying to appear unconcerned. A big man leaned against the bar at the far end where he could watch the door. He was listening to a dusty rider while he stared across the smoky room, careful not to let his glance rest on the tall Texan who gazed into the depths of his untasted liquor. But Diamond Matson was watching his man! Two men got into an argument not six feet away from the boss rustler. He watched them with calm indifference as the other drinkers crowded back against the wall out of the line of fire. One of the men was a lean Texan with the floppy brim of his Stetson pinned back. The other was a skinny jasper with gunman written all over his mean face. The Texan was swaying drunkenly as he faced the killer who crouched toward him with hands taloned above the twin sixguns thonged low on his wool pants.

"I was ridin' left point on that Figger 8 herd, an' I recognized you among that bunch of raiders," the old Texan stated loudly. "Rustler fits yore hide like a new burnt brand on uh maverick mossy-horn. Yo're the skunk what smoked down Alamo Smith when he wasn't lookin' yore way. I taken up for my pard!"

He spoke simply and to the point, and men held their breath while they waited for his destruction. The skinny gunman wen for his sixgun without warning, and the drunken Texan underwent a complete transformation. Gone was the sagging stupidness as his right hand flashed down to slap leather with a pop that was echoed instantly by the roar of the heavy forty-five in his fist. His gray eyes blazed savagely while he watched the killer jerk back before falling to the heavy sawdust sprinkled on the plank flooring. Then a stern voice cut through the smoky quiet of the room.

"Drop that iron easy-like, Tombstone!"

The lean Texan whirled with smoking gun in hand. He relaxed with a smile when he took in the little play behind him. The dust-coated rider who had been talking to Diamond Matson allowed his half-drawn weapon to thud back into the holster as he stared into the muzzle of a forty-five. Bill Tilghman was behind that old Peacemaker, and the marshal of Dodge never spoke but once.

"She was a fair shake as I sees it," the marshal explained in quiet clear tones. "Skinny Durgin walked up and picked hisself a gun-fight because he figgered th' *Tejano* was out on his feet. 'Sides that his thumb missed the hammer complete, and

he paid heavy for his mistake. She's self defense, gents; th' Law speakin' final."

"That Texan made war-talk, Marshal," Diamond Matson cut in. "This yere is a free country."

"Th' Texan backed up his wawa fitten and proper," the marshal retorted sharply. "I said it was self defense, Diamond. Do I hear any augerments to the contrary?"

Matson shrugged his huge shoulders as a couple of swampers came in to drag the body to the back room. For a fleeting instant the eyes of the marshal rested on the tall frame of Colt Travers; noted the twin Colts on lean thighs, tied-down and toed-in for a quick draw. The marshal smiled with his eyes as he walked slowly to the door and shouldered through the batwings. Colt Travers was still staring into his glass when the husky voice of Diamond Matson growled across the room.

"There's them hereabouts what won't go back down th' Texas trail sittin' up. She's just as fur from here to there, as it was from there to here!"

SHOWDOWN

Colt Travers picked up his glass and moved down the empty bar alongside the lean Texan who had holstered his gun and was now digesting the remarks of the speaker. Colt Travers nudged him gently with his elbow.

"Howdy, Olin," he whispered. "Long time no see you!"

"Colt Travers! My gosh but it's good to see home folks yere in this hostyle country. When you hit Dodge?"

"Jest one day after I passed th' Figger 8 herd hittin' along rapid-like under a fast-moving crew," Travers remarked dryly. "Them steers is considerable ganted, Olin. You ought to know better than to snap yore beef stock along under flippin' rope-ends. Looked like two herds; they was that many stragglers in th' Drag."

The older man looked his companion over with understanding eyes. He knew the language of the range, and he got the message Travers was weaving into his careless conversation. That his Figger 8 trail-herd would be in Dodge within two days, counting the difference in speed between a running horse and a plodding beef-herd. Also that they had been pushed hard and fast to lose gramma-grass flesh built on in the Texas Panhandle for the Kansas markets.

"Two thousand head in that herd, and I started out shorthanded," he muttered bitterly. "Lost five men before we left Dalhart. Some slick drover offered them higher pay I reckon."

"If I had knowed you was headin' north, I'd have doubled up with you," Travers answered sympathetically. "That way it would make double fightin' strength against raiders. Stand pat, old settler, and remember the Alamo. You might get yore herd back."

"You mean . . .?"

"I mean for you to drop back agin that wall when I shakes my head!"

Olin Ordway nodded his gray head without further questioning. Texas men talked little and thought much, and the Figger 8 owner had a lot to think about. His face took on a look of hopefulness when he thought of the trail-herd he might recover, but there was a sadness in his eyes for the seven men buried back in the Strip; victims of the raiders' guns.

A dry rattling sound came to his ears when Colt Travers shook his head from side to side, and the old rancher moved back to the wall as his eyes fastened on the twelve rattles and a button fastened to Colt Travers' tall Stetson. Diamond Matson also looked up as he growled a word to the man at his side. The fellow stepped back as Matson straightened his heavy frame and sneered with the corners of his mouth. Colt Travers was staring into the bottom of his glass as he again shook his head to dislodge a blue-bottle fly from his

tanned cheek. That dry rattle could be heard all over the long room, and every eye was turned to discover the source as hands settled down on sixguns. Every man in that room knew a Diamond-back when he heard the vicious warning and then hands fell away from guns as they located the noise.

Now Diamond Matson shook his big head while he glared at Colt Travers. Another vicious rattle whirred angrily, and the crowd watched quietly when they sensed the little play between this young Texan and the King-pin of the rustlers. They knew the game Matson was playing, but they also knew that he was named for the Diamond-back, and that he was the fastest gun-hawk in Dodge—unless Bill Tilighman had him shaded. And Tilighman was the Law.

"Th' name's Diamond Matson, stranger. That tell you anything?"

Colt Travers glanced up slowly and shook his head. Again that dry warning rattle of sudden death as his head jerked from side to side with negative answer. When he did not speak the big man's face clouded with anger.

"I wears the rattles in these parts," he mouthed hoarsely. "I don't like competition, and one of us is due to lose his stinger!"

"I met sev'ral other snakes back on the trail," Travers said conversationally. "One was a mean jigger what tried to poison a water hole; and he threw down on me with his sixgun. We buried him after a fashion, and then two other gents took exception to breathing the same air with me. One was a skinny runt with two big guns he didn't know how to use; the other was a big gent just about yore size. A bunch of fellers driving a Figger 8 herd done buried them two. So I come on into Dodge to fill a date with a gent what sent me his personal card. I got it pinned up there on my skypiece."

"Yo're Colt Travers!"

"The same," the Texan grinned. "And you knew it all the time. But I ain't packing the Star no more," he added significantly.

"Are you trying to tell me that you killed Snake and Bull Frazer, and Two-gun Kinney?"

"Just verifying it," Travers answered calmly. "Skinny Durgin told you the same thing just before Olin Ordway of the Figger 8 ventilated him. You send word down to Texas that you'd meet me here in the Last Chance. I'm here, Diamond!"

"You Taking Up For The Departed?"

"Yeah," Matson sneered, "but you won't be long. You said something about a Figger 8 trail-herd I had a contract to drive."

"They was pushing them dogies," Travers answered critically. "Any gent what knows anything at all about trail-driving, knows that them critters has to eat as they come. A good crew don't even let the herd know they're being took some place. This bunch looked to me like long-riders what had throwed a wide loop. But like I told you, they ain't as many of them now as they was."

"Enough to bring that herd of mine in," Matson growled, and for a moment he fought to control his rising temper. "But to get back to you and me. Yo're a salty hairpin like sev'ral more who cut my sign when they was on th' prod."

"That note of yores said to meet you in the Last Chance at Dodge if I packed the sand," Travers reminded the outlaw. "I'm here!"

The big man glanced all around the

room and sighed with evident relief. "Thought mebbe you had Bill Tilighman backing up yore play, too," he sneered. "Yo're purty young to die, but I taken up for Snake. You never saw the day you could beat him to his iron on the level."

"A gent should think up all the excuses he's got when he starts looking for a way out," the Texan answered judicially. "Snake was only one excuse; Two-gun Kinney and Bull Frazer was both saddle-pards of yores too. Two-gun taken up for Snake, and right now he's got boot-hill lilies growin' on his chest."

"You pulled a gun-sneak," Matson sneered. "With me it's different, and I'm waiting, feller!"

"Yore deal," Travers murmured softly. "I never ask for no edge even agin a short-horn."

Matson ran his eyes over the crowd. "You gents heard this *Tejano* challenge me," he said loudly. "Called me a rustler, and tells me to reach first for my irons!"

"We heard him, Diamond," the drawling voice of Olin Ordway answered clearly. "He shore as hell said you was a rustler, an' as I sees it, she's yore play."

An evil smile of anticipation spread across the beefy face as Diamond Matson settled himself on his huge feet. His elbows were pressed closely against his sides with hands spread out like claws above crossed gunbelts. Big shoulders hunched over in a crouch as yellow flecks began to dance across the greenish pupils of his little eyes, deep-set under shaggy black brows.

Colt Travers was standing near the bar with the untasted whisky in his left hand. His right hung loosely at his side as he stared into the glinting eyes at the end of the bar. Every man had stepped back against the wall to be out of the line of fire when the blow-off came. Colt Travers shook his head with a jerk to start the rattles on his hat talking.

Diamond Matson drew a deep breath and shook his own head like an angry bull. Without warning his big hands plunged down to slap the worn walnut butts, and Matson started his draw with a jerking speed that made the watchers gasp. Colt Travers raised his right hand in a smooth swivel that drew the heavy gun without conscious effort, and a muzzle-bloom flashed at the end of the long barrel before the black smoke pushed it away in a whirling ring that ballooned between the two men and widened out as it traveled.

Diamond Matson coughed and jerked back on his bootheels. The two guns hung poised on the lips of his half-breed holster while a red stain spread across his white silk shirt, and Colt Travers watched with the air of an expert workman. The big outlaw made a savage effort as his face twisted with pain and rage; the crowd gasped when the thick arms jerked up spasmodically. The young Texan gauged those lifting arms carefully without emotion on his tanned face. Up another inch as the thick fingers began to tighten on the triggers, and Colt Travers squeezed the trigger slowly like a man testing old whisky against the back of his tongue.

Again that puff ball of red flame blossomed from the muzzle of the gun held against his hip. The two thick arms dropped like leaden weights when the heavy guns thudded to the sawdust, and Diamond Matson buckled his knees and slid forward to crash on his face.

A movement behind the fallen outlaw caught the Texan's eye, and he flipped his smoking gun up to cover the thin-faced man who had been drinking with Matson.

"You taking up for th' departed, Tombstone?" he drawled, and his voice held a strange hush.

The gunman let his Colt slide back in the holster as he slowly raised his hands. "Not this time," he muttered. "She's yore say-so, Travers."

Colt Travers raised the pony glass in his left hand and drank slowly as he holstered the smoking gun on his right leg. His eyes were watchful while he slid the glass to the bar with a long sigh of satisfaction, and he turned slowly when a heavy voice spoke behind him.

"I seen the whole play, Colt Travers. That there was self defense; th' Law speakin'!"

"Hi yuh, Bill Tilighman," the Texan answered heartily.

"Four years since you and me rounded up the Lopez gang near Eagle Pass," the marshal agreed quietly. "You through with yore snake killin'?"

Colt Travers glanced around the long room. Old Dallas Turner was standing in the same place by the front door, but now the two guns in his gnarled fists were covering the crowd. Against the wall Olin Ordway and old Jake Curry had also filled their hands, and several men sighed as half-drawn guns slipped softly back into oiled holsters.

"'Pears like, Bill," Travers answered. "But you might give Olin Ordway a hand when his trail-herd gets here tomorrow. Some of Matson's men are driving them in for Olin. They're burnt with the Figger 8 iron on the left flank."

"I been talking to Olin this morning," the marshal answered dryly. "Both me and him knew you was in town to keep yore date with that Diamond-back over yonder. If they don't drag him out pronto he's goin' to draw flies. I'm planning to have a li'l surprise for Matson's long-riders when they pull in just to teach them that Kansas is different from th' Strip where they ain't no law!"

"You need any help I'll stay over and give you a hand," Colt Travers offered quietly. "She's a hard job bringing cattle up through some of them dry scrapes without having to bed down dry with poisoned water in sight. That was what put old Dallas on th' peck when he met up with Snake Matson and his men salting a water hole."

"I can handle 'em," the marshal answered confidently. "But thanks just th' same, Colt."

"Forty rod, with a double chaser of th' same. An' just leave th' bottle, barkeep!"

Both men turned quickly when the dry rasping voice shouted the order. Colt Travers grinned and turned his face away to keep old Dallas from seeing his amusement. Dallas leaned forward to whisper hoarsely as though his throat were so dry that he could scarcely articulate.

"This yere snake-killin' is dry bizness," he confided to the young trail boss. "And ontil we leaves yere to meet th' C bar T trail-herd, all th' snakes I want to see is gonna come out of bottles. Yere's lookin' at you, Ramrod, and fer Gawd's sake, throw them dam rattles away. They hain't no more snakes left in either the Nations or the Strip. L gives you Howdy, Bill!"

The marshal smiled and took a drink from the old jingler's bottle. Jake Curry moved up to the bar and cleared his throat suggestively. The marshal passed the bottle solemnly and winked at Olin Ordway.

"Young men for action; old men for wisdom," he drawled. "She was a showdown, gents, an' the Law wins once more. Self-defense, says I, so drink hearty and we'll let her hang an' rattle. Yere's mud in yore eyes, Tejanos!"

A Master Thriller Novel

MURDER
AT
GLEN ATHOL

By NORMAN LIPPINCOTT

7/6 *net*

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LONDON **KINGSWOOD**

Blame the Dead

By

DONALD BARR CHIDSEY

Author of
"Carnation Babies,"
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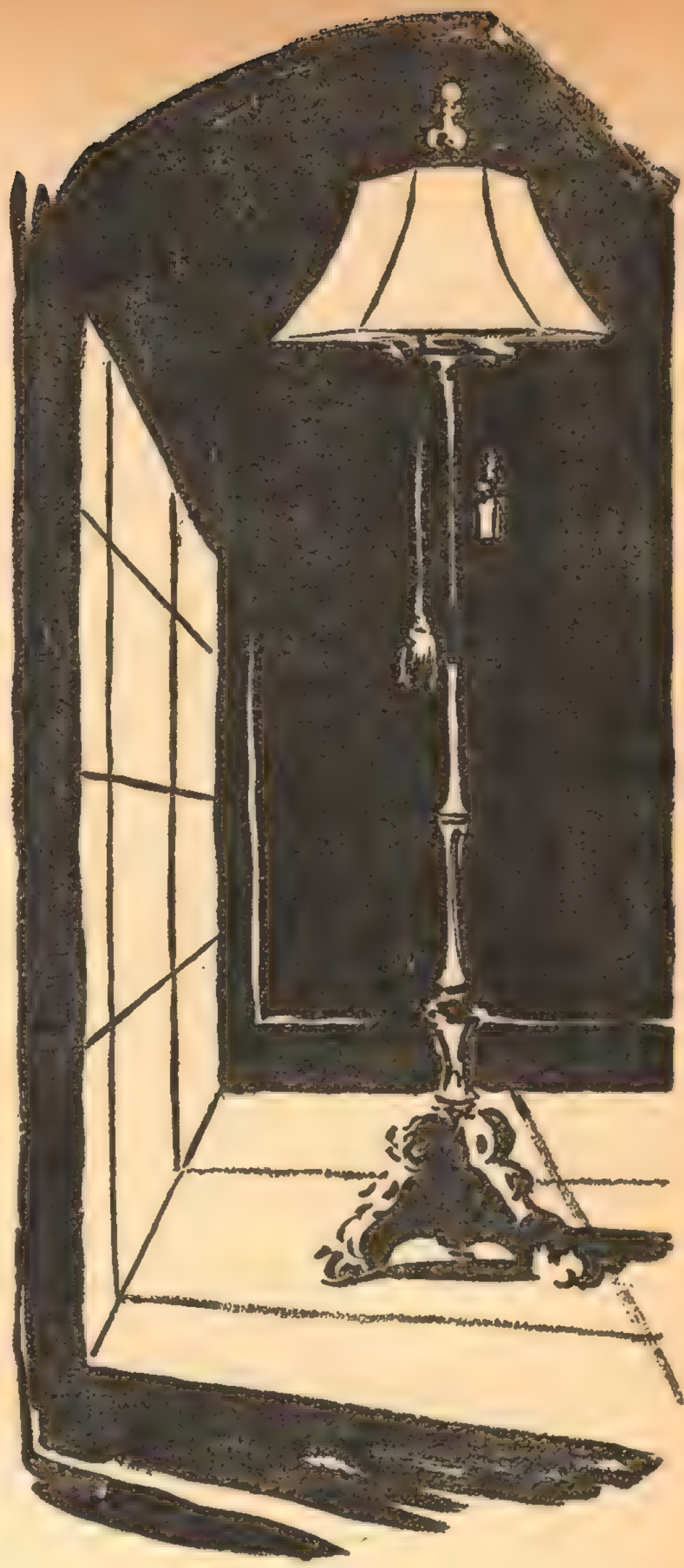


THE jury was out less than twenty minutes, and announcement of its verdict prompted some buzz but no outburst. "The Chief," sighed Timpkin, as he scribbled a telegram, "is going to be wild when he reads this."

If the Chief was, he didn't show it. He was a solidly built man, though no giant, and he sat in an office calculated to impress —a dramatic sort of office, with a dramatic desk holding many telephones. He could throw eagerness into his voice and face when he addressed some convention on the need for centralizing police information, or when he welcomed some delegation to the vast quarters of America's Scotland Yard in the big white building at Fourteenth and Pennsylvania Avenue; but that was showmanship; alone, or with subordinates, he was a sphinx.

He put the message aside, said to a secretary, "Get Barclay here from New York," and turned to other work.

So the next morning Kenneth Barclay stood smiling in that dramatic office. Ken Barclay was usually smiling, a little. It wasn't a fatuous smile, it wasn't obsequious, and surely it wasn't supercilious, or cynical. It was a smile prompted by pleasure, but by a misty, rather secretive pleasure. He seemed a man amused by some memory which he didn't relate because it could not possibly mean anything to anybody else. It made him a shade mysterious, that smile, though in every other respect he was straightforward enough.

Yet you wouldn't have supposed, seeing him, that Ken Barclay could be harboring many memories, amusing or otherwise. He was thirty, but he looked an undergraduate. Aside from that smile, and his natural good looks—he had dark brown hair, and forthright, dark brown eyes—there was nothing unusual about his appearance. His clothes were neat, not garish; they were not quite the best clothes he could afford. He was thin, had an

Jules Marot Was a Hard-bitten Criminal Who Was Accustomed to Bossing Racketeers and Murderers and He Didn't Like Interference—Especially from a G-Man

amiable manner, and never did much talking.

The Chief said:

"They acquitted Jules Marot yesterday."

"Yes, sir."

"It begins to look as though I was wrong in trying to get him on an income tax charge. Hereafter we go after him straight. And you're elected."

This time Ken didn't even say "Yes, sir." He merely smiled. The Chief, who fancied a semi-military atmosphere, hadn't asked him to sit down.

"Naturally you know Marot's game?"

"Oh, yes."

"It's got to stop, Barclay! We can't afford to let the cleverest crook in the country thumb his nose at us! We've pretty well cleaned up the outlaws who got so much publicity, and I don't say those fellows weren't tough—they were—but they were small potatoes compared with Jules Marot.

"He's outsmarted the police of New York time and again—and the police of a dozen other cities, if it comes to that. They can't even manage to revoke his license. Now what we've got to do is anticipate his next big job—he must be about ready for another one—and beat him to it, and get an airtight case against him before we

even think of making an arrest. That's your assignment. You're answerable only to me, though Timpkin will coöperate with you any time you need him. Get Marot. But watch out! Don't make the mistake of thinking that this man isn't dangerous! He may wear two-hundred-dollar suits, and have a cultivated taste in oils—but he won't stop at murder if he feels somebody crowding him!"

The Chief turned back to his papers. There was some silence. Then Ken asked:

"Is that all, sir?"

"That's all," said the Chief, without looking up.

Ken went outside. In the ante-room there was a bronze tablet:

"In Memory of
Special Agents
of the
Division of
Investigation
who have lost their
lives in line of duty"

Eight names followed this, on eight bronze strips. They filled the lower part of the tablet; but they could be moved closer together, if necessary.

Ken Barclay nodded to this tablet, as to an old acquaintance, and for an instant his face had no expression. But he was smiling again when he quit the ante-room.

Next morning, in New York, he called upon Jules Marot.

THESE trim offices, you might suppose, were those of a prosperous real estate firm, or an importing house. No hole-in-the-wall! Ken found two busy stenographers, a pretty girl at a desk marked "Information," a not-too-fresh office boy, and a gorilla. Only the gorilla looked out of place. He stood about six feet three and was proportionately broad. A resident of British West Africa, who knew the States only through movies, might have pointed to this creature and said unhesitatingly. "Detective." He was almost a burlesque. He wore a derby, rubber heels, shiny black coat, greasy black vest, soggy black shoes. He even smoked a cigar. The resident of B. W. A. might have known jungle apes which displayed greater intelligence and were more prepossessing.

Window dressing? The fellow had that bulldog glare which must be very reassuring to twittery society dames who have achieved their conception of detectives from the stage. He looked, Ken reflected, as though dynamite couldn't move him—yet a pickpocket probably could steal the coat off his back!

The girl at the information desk said Mr. Marot was busy.

Ken said he would wait.

The girl said she was afraid it might be a long while.

Ken said he had plenty of time.

The gorilla spoke. It was like something heavy being dragged over a rough cellar floor:

"He ain't going to be free all morning."

Ken still was smiling. "I'll wait," he said again, and sat down.

The gorilla gave him a dirty look and walked to a window, where he stood twirling a cheap watch charm.

Ken had taken the end of the bench nearest the inner office. He could hear a murmur of voices there—rather he could hear the murmur of a single voice, but there were gaps of silence which indicated that someone was answering in much lower tones. The one audible voice got louder, angrier. The girl at the information desk glanced nervously at the gorilla, who hadn't stirred. Then she glanced at Ken.

"I really don't think Mr. Marot will be able to see you this morning," she said. "Can't I make an appointment for you?"

Ken smiled, shook his head.

The inner office must have been nearly soundproof, but now the loud-voiced man was shouting. For the first time his words were clear.

"—and if you think I'm going to drop

out you're crazy! Keep your hands on the desk, you lousy——"

It wasn't so much the words themselves as the pitch of the voice. Ken Barclay sprang from the bench and threw himself against the office door. It was unlocked, and he burst into the office. In back of him a woman gave a squeaky, chopped-off scream; and there was a buffalo-like bellow which could only have come from the gorilla.

BEHIND an enormous Empire desk a smallish, beautifully dressed, pale, foreign-looking man stood erect, his dark eyes dilated. At the side of this desk, only a few feet away, a tall man in a double-breasted gray suit was jerking something out of a hip holster.

The gun didn't explode. Ken had cleared the room in one bound, caught the tall man's wrist, swung it down, around, then up. The man squealed, and dropped the gun. Ken lifted him in one swift, sweet motion, and threw him across the desk so that he clattered in a heap on the floor beyond. This happened very fast.

"Friend of yours?" asked Ken, and picked up the gun.

The man behind the desk had moved only his right hand, and that but a few inches. Now he was holding a small, ugly automatic. There was no expression on his face.

"I know him slightly. Not really a friend."

The gorilla came charging into the room, a pistol in his fist. Jules Marot, without even looking at him, without taking his gaze from Ken, said:

"All right, Hanker. Outside."

The gorilla looked at Marot, looked at Ken, looked too at the man on the floor, who was stunned and moaning. The gorilla shook his head. This was too much for him. But he went out, as ordered.

"Thanks," said Jules Marot, "for saving my life."

"He really meant to kill you, then?"

"Probably. He loses his head easily, Lefferts does." He put the automatic away. He was still staring at Ken. "You're a swell wrestler."

The only thing on the desk had been a large shallow glass bowl filled with pansies. This had been swept to the floor when Lefferts was hurled across the desk. Now Marot picked it up, filled it at the wash basin, and replaced the pansies tenderly but swiftly, as though they were goldfish which might die if left out of water.

"From my own garden," he said. His delicate fingers pushed a flower here, pulled one there. "Picked them myself. First ones this season."

Ken went around the desk, yanked Lefferts to a sitting position, shook him. He

held the gun in front of Lefferts' face.

"Have you got a permit to carry this thing?"

The tall man blinked.

"Sure I got one." He reached a shaky hand. "Gimme it back."

"I'll give it to you over the ear," Ken Barclay said pleasantly.

Lefferts glared up from under black eyebrows.

"Sure I got a permit. Here." He found it, handed it to Ken, who examined it and then tossed it back.

"Now gimme that gun."

Ken said:

"Maybe the cops would like it for evidence." He turned to Marot. "Well, I've got no charge. He hasn't violated any federal law that I know of. What about you? Felonious assault with intent to kill?"

Marot murmured:

"So you're a federal? I was wonder-

ing." He glanced at Lefferts, who was getting to his feet. "No, I haven't any charge to make. He got a little excited, that's all. Get out, Sam."

"First I want my gun."

"Get out! Before this gentleman gets tired of being good-natured!"

JULES MAROT wore a blue suit with a white pencil stripe, a stiff blue-and-white striped collar and a stiff blue-and-white striped shirt. The stripes on the collar were vertical, the stripes on the shirt horizontal, which somehow wasn't as theatrical as it sounds. It gave Marot a foreign look, a Latin look; but he had that anyway. There was a gardenia in his buttonhole, and he wore a black silk knitted tie. His mustache was tiny, black, trig. His hair was black and silky, and looked as though it never got out of comb even when he slept. His eyes were large and very sad. Nobody ever had heard him raise his voice. He was a bachelor, and lived alone in a little house in northern New Jersey, where he collected oil paintings and bred Siamese cats.

Now he pushed a chair under Ken Barclay.

"So you're a federal? I thought you boys were all finished with me."

"No," said Ken, smiling.

"Well, you're wasting your time. I don't like to be rude to you—especially after what you've just done—but you're wasting your time."

"I just take orders," Ken explained, "and my orders are to get you. So I came here first."

"I see," Marot said slowly. His eyes went cold. His mouth tightened. Here was no longer a mild-mannered, dapper gentleman who boasted of his garden. Here was a hard-bitten criminal—a man who was accustomed to bossing racketeers and murderers—and who didn't like interference. He leaned forward, placing his hands flat on the desk. "Yes, I see," he whispered.

"No," said Ken, "you don't see at all." He laughed. "I wasn't even dreaming of a shake-down, Mr. Marot. I just wanted to meet you."

"Oh."

Marot was looking at Ken with a different expression now. In his years of dealings with the police he had never met a detective like this.

"Do I understand that the Department of Justice has done me the honor of assigning a special man to me in the future?"

"That's the idea. So I'm starting by coming directly to you. Why not? You'd soon find out anyway. And I thought I'd like to know what you're like personally. Of course I've heard a lot about you, but mostly from men who had reason to dislike you. I hope you don't think I'm cocky?"

He said this in all earnestness, and Marot accepted it earnestly.

"No," Marot said, "I don't think you're cocky. But you do seem to have a lot of self-confidence. I don't blame you, in a way, after seeing you toss Sam Lefferts across my desk. But this is something else again. You're starting to investigate a man who is running a sound, respectable business. Lots of other detectives, older men than you, and more years in the game, have poked around here—and they never found anything wrong. I know that you people think I'm crooked, and you're welcome to think that. But the insurance people trust me."

"They have to."

"Eh? Well, whether they have to or not, they do. I get results."

"Yes," said Ken Barclay, still smiling.

THEN Marot too smiled, which was unusual. He leaned back, slapping the arms of his chair.

"I guess you're not so dumb at that," Marot admitted.

"Could I look around? Of course I haven't got a warrant."

"Why certainly! My records are open to anybody!" He touched a buzzer. "But you won't find anything wrong."

"I just want to look," Ken said.

Hanker, the gorilla, entered. He still was frowning, for this business was much too deep for his tiny mind.

"None of the other boys out there, Hanker?"

"No, sir. Only me."

"All right." Marot rose. "Then I'll show you around personally, Mr.— What is your name, by the way?"

"Barclay. Kenneth Barclay."

"Oh," said Marot. It was obvious that he'd heard this name. "I didn't expect you to be so young."

They started for the outer office. But in the doorway Marot paused.

"Will you excuse me for a moment? I just remembered a call I should make."

Ken waited outside the office door, which was open. Marot, in the office, called a number, and a moment later started; "Listen, your pal was just here and——" Then he noticed the door. He stopped, put down the instrument, went to the door and closed it.

He emerged a moment later, and they went through the files. Ken had neither the time nor the desire to make a thorough examination. He merely glanced over the records for the past few weeks.

"You do much guarding at weddings and so-forth?"

"Oh, yes. Our operatives are well acquainted with the leading jewel snatchers, so naturally we're in demand for that sort of thing."

"I noticed Mrs. Wendell Harris's name. That's what made me ask."

"Yes." Marot smiled a little. "She lost an earring from her celebrated sapphire set a couple of weeks ago, and she was all worked up about it. Came straight to me. Well, I went out there with one of my best men, and we poked around a few minutes and found the thing behind a radiator, where it had fallen. Of course, there are tricks to every trade, and I don't have to tell you, Barclay, that we fussed around a lot, and looked very important, before we handed the thing over. Mrs. Harris thought we were wizards. It's silly—but it brought in a small fee, and it helps to build up the reputation, so why not?"

"Sure," said Ken. "Why not?"

"Mrs. Harris fired her maid, which seemed to me a dirty trick because I'm sure the maid had nothing to do with it. I got the girl another job, on my own account, but naturally I didn't tell Mrs. Harris that. Mrs. Harris thinks I'm the greatest sleuth in the world. I'm sending a man out there to guard her valuables, and her guests' valuables, this week-end. She's having a big house party.

"As a matter of fact," Marot went on, "though you boys get all steamed up about the occasional return of stolen goods we manage, those cases are few and far between, and the bulk of our business consists of just such trivial things as this."

Twenty minutes later they parted, again shaking hands.

"Glad to have met you, Barclay. Drop in any time."

"Thank you. You've been very kind."

Ken did not ask why Sam Lefferts had been about to murder the private detective. Ken never was one for wasting his breath.

He stopped in a telephone booth, called the bureau's New York office, and gave a fellow agent a carefully remembered telephone number.

"Find out where that is, won't you? He got the party right away—didn't have to go through a switchboard—so I suppose it's a private phone."

Then he went to the big white building in Center Street.

AGENTS of the Bureau of Investigation are not always welcomed at police stations. For publication, everything is hunky-dory between federal and municipal police, but in fact there's often jealousy. The cops, who after all get very little besides glory for risking their lives, and not too much of that, complain that the federals have a habit of horning into their cases and grabbing all the publicity. The fed-

erals, to be sure, privately say the same thing about the cops. So there you are.

But Kenneth Barclay could enter New York headquarters with a clear conscience and no diminution of smile. He had friends there, and particularly he had a friend on the Broadway Squad, one Buckley, first class detective. Buckley was large and slow. Three times he had been cited for conspicuous bravery. With a record like that, and with his brains, and a little ambition, he should have been a captain; but he was lazy.

"Hi, Boy Scout."

"Hello, tough."

Ken placed a .45 automatic on the desk. Buckley asked:

"Find it in the street?"

"No. I took it from a man named Sam Lefferts. Know him?"

Buckley frowned, for this sounded like work.

"Tall and skinny, dark hair, biggish nose, quick temper?"

"That's the one."

"What was he doing with a gat? He's got a record, that guy. Why didn't you fasten a Sullivan on him?"

"He had a permit. From some little dump up around Saratoga."

Buckley, with considerable effort, rose. He scowled at the gun.

"Those upstate permits aren't any good here now, since the Governor signed that bill the other day. Sam ought to know that. It's a disgrace that a guy like that ever was allowed to get one in the first place."

"Who is he?"

"He used to be Georgie Gulick's bodyguard. Georgie's one of our highest-hat crooks. Hard-boiled shirts and all that. He had a reputation for knowing where a lot of hot stones were cached, and I suppose that's why he figured he needed a bodyguard. Or maybe he just wanted to show off. But anyway, I understand he fired Sam a little while ago." Buckley sighed. He took Ken's elbow. "Well, anyway, let's go and ask Sam a few questions, huh?"

IT WAS on Eighth Avenue, in the Thirties, a dreary little walkup smelling of cabbage and bad plumbing.

"Might be a good idea to iron out, just in case," panted Buckley as they ascended. "Sam's only one of the guys around here that don't like cops." He shuddered to a stop on the third floor wall. "So here we are. Now we knock." He knocked. He was standing on one side of the door, and Ken stood on the other; both held pistols.

"So we get no answer. So we knock again."

But after a while Buckley said:

"This is no fun, standing here." He tried the door. It was unlocked, and he pushed it open. "So we walk in."

It was a two-room apartment. You had a feeling that millions of bugs were watching you from behind the wallpaper, from the cracks in the floor, from almost every place. It smelled damp and sickly. In a corner, unscreened, unabashed, was an old

zinc sink with one faucet, which dripped indefatigably. A doorway showed the end of an iron bed. The detectives walked there together. And together they stopped in the doorway, Ken with a little gasp, Buckley with a whistle.

"So we find a stiff," Buckley muttered.

Sam Lefferts wore a dirty undershirt, gray trousers, red socks, and a look of amazement. The undershirt was covered with blood. Ken knelt beside him. After a minute:

"Jabbed at least five times. The first might have done it."

Buckley, in the doorway, asked:

"Lately?"

"He's still warm. And no rigor mortis yet. Besides, remember I saw this man alive not much more than an hour ago."

"I meant to ask you about that. Tell me about it when I come back. I'm going to call Spring 7-3100. Stick around."

When Buckley returned, Ken was reading some letters.

"A girl named Mae Nordkin," he said.

Buckley panted:

"They'll be up right away. Nordkin, huh? Well, in the meanwhile, how come you had Sam's gun, fella?"

Ken told him. Buckley nodded sadly.

"A flock of big-time crime in this town runs right into that guy Marot," Buckley gloomed, "and that's just where it stops!"

"I'm going home. Give me a ring, won't you, when you pick up that woman? I'd like to listen to her answers."

KEN'S home was not the sort you'd expect a detective to have. It was a red brick building in Washington Square North, straight, narrow, very prim, with green shutters and bright green window boxes. For although the Barclays weren't rich any longer, they remained powerful in Knickerbocker society; and Ken's mother, a very positive woman, was determined that they should be housed as befitted their family name, whether or not they could afford it.

Ken went to his room and changed. Then he went downstairs and called the field office. He was informed that the number Jules Marot had called was listed opposite the name of George P. Carstairs, who lived in East Sixty-second Street.

"Thanks."

"Need any help, Ken?"

"Not yet, thanks. I may tomorrow."

He was hanging up when his father entered the room. Barclay, Sr. was red-faced, bluff in appearance. He had a country squire-ish air.

"How's the work going?"

"Swell, Dad. Thanks."

"Did your mother tell you Anthony Serris is going to get that ambassadorship and that she's persuaded him to appoint you his secretary?"

"Yes, we had that out just before I went down to Washington. It's nice of Mr. Serris, but I'm turning down the offer."

"Your mother," Barclay Sr. said cautiously, "thinks it isn't really decent for you to be doing this 'horrid police work,' as she calls it. She certainly would like to see you in the diplomatic corps, Kenneth."

"I know. But I'd stifle, Dad! I just couldn't stand it! I like dancing, and talking to women, and all that, and I've got nothing against counts and princes, but it just isn't my kind of stuff."

"Well, of course, if you feel that way ——"

"Dad, I've got a round knee. I couldn't balance a teacup on it if I tried. And I've got so used to grabbing my meals whenever I get a chance, that if I found I was expected to conduct a lady in to dinner I'd forget myself and make a dash for the table without her."

The parent chuckled.

"Good boy. I hope you stick to that. Only don't tell your mother I said so!" He cleared his throat. "Working on something new?"

"Yes."

"Well, be careful. I'm sure you're quick with your pistol, after winning all those marksmanship medals and so-forth, but some of these desperados have a habit of shooting men in the back, and I wouldn't want to pick up my paper some morning and see—— Well."

"Yes, I know."

For the moment he wasn't smiling. He was thinking of that bronze tablet in Washington, and the eight names.

The East Sixty-second Street address was a good one, a small and swanky apartment house. Ken asked the doorman:

"Mr. Carstairs come in?"

"No, sir. But we expect him any minute."

"Thanks. I'll wait in the foyer."

There was an attendant inside, but he

was busy at a desk and didn't see Ken, who stepped quietly into a telephone booth.

A man entered, was taken upstairs by the attendant. Then two women. Then the door opened again.

"Hello, Harold. Any messages?"

"Nothing, Mr. Carstairs."

"The admiral out there said somebody was asking for me?"

"I haven't seen anybody, sir. Will you go up?"

Ken looked out of the booth in time to see the newcomer. Neat, firm topcoat. Black pointed shoes, gray spats. A gray silk scarf. And above the scarf a lean, hard, dark face. The features were little, almost aristocratic. The eyebrows were thin and high.

"Yes, I'll go up. Thanks. Tomorrow I'm going out to Bernardsville for a few days, Harold, and if anybody should call ——"

The elevator door slid shut. Ken walked out of the building.

The door man asked:

"Did you see Mr. Carstairs, sir?"

"Yes, I saw him. Thank you."

Then another telephone call. The Barclay butler, whose name, to the especial delight of Mrs. Barclay, was Scroggins, reported that a Mr. Buckley had left word that the police were about to interrogate a Miss Nordkin in Center Street.

"He did not say what number Center Street, sir, and when I endeavored to ask him he hung up."

"Thank you, Scroggins. I think I know where it is."

THE Nordkin girl was no gun moll. She was tiny, quietly dressed, and scared half out of her wits. Neither Buckley nor Ken participated in the questioning; they stood in a corner.

Buckley whispered:

"We're not getting anywhere."

"You question Marot?"

"Yes. And he was nice as could be about it, the way he always is. Came right over, and shook hands all around, and handed out cigarettes with his monogram on 'em, and lied like the genius he is."

"What did he say?"

"Said Lefferts had asked him for a job, and he told Lefferts to come back in a couple of days, and Lefferts came back today. Marot says he'd looked him up in the meanwhile and decided he didn't want a guy like that working for him, and told him so, and Sam got sore."

"Sounds fishy."

"Sure it does, but what are you going to do? We let him go, of course. Had to. Now we got a pick-up call out for George Gulick, that Sam used to be bodyguard for. We figure that if George fired Sam there might have been some hard feelings. George is a pretty bad baby himself. And a hard guy to find."

The girl was protesting:

"I haven't seen him since night before last."

"Did he seem to be worried about anything then?"

"No, he was happy. I guess he was a little drunk. He wanted me to marry him. Said he was going to buy a lot of swell clothes, and said he'd cover me with jewels that would match my eyes."

"That would match your eyes, eh?"

The Nordkin girl was a perfect blonde, with bright blue eyes.

"Something like that. I didn't pay much attention to him."

Ken whispered to Buckley:

"You suppose I could slip back to Identification and get a squint at this George Gulick's mug?"

Buckley looked at him strangely, sideways.

"Sure. Go ahead. Charley's in there now. You know him."

In the middle of the second flat steel tray, Ken flipped up the card he sought. The pictures, front and side, were no surprise. He had been tolerably sure that he would recognize that thin, hard face, and those small, dark, hard eyes. Gulick's hair was mussed, in the pictures, and his

necktie was disarranged, but still he seemed sleek and polished.

In the corridor outside Buckley was waiting.

"It's a funny thing about you wanting to look at that mug."

Ken said:

"You can't tell. I might run into him some time."

"I certainly would hate to think that if you did run into him, Ken, you wouldn't let us know right away. I'd certainly hate to think that you were trying to grab something out from underneath us."

Ken said earnestly:

"Buck, I'm only interested in one thing, and that is to get an airtight, lawyer-proof case against Jules Marot, let the newspaper stories fall where they may."

"It would be elegant, that's a fact." Buckley looked at the floor. "Where you going now?"

"I'm going to call on an old friend of mine."

"Wouldn't be somebody we might like to talk to, here?"

Ken laughed.

"No. This fellow lives in Park Avenue and drives a Rolls-Royce."

"You got some funny friends," said Buckley, "for a cop."

HARRY STORK had roomed with Ken Barclay in college. He was a slim, firm young man with military mustaches, a nervous temperament, a country club manner. He was outrageously rich. Once he had been an all-American end. Now he was an amateur stunt flyer and crack polo player.

"Lord! it's good to see you again! You're always so busy with this job of yours that a man forgets what you look like! Here, let me make you a drink."

Ken said:

"This is really business. I understand Mrs. Wendell Harris is tossing a house party, starting tomorrow. Are you going?"

"Why, I was. But if you get the day off I'd be tickled to death to duck out of it, and maybe we could——"

"No, I want you to go."

Harry looked puzzled. This was not like Kenneth Barclay.

"And I'll go with you," Ken added.

"Oh, swell! The old dear will be delighted! She's heard about you being a secret service man, which is what she calls it, and she's been after me to get you to come to some of her parties. I'll give her a ring."

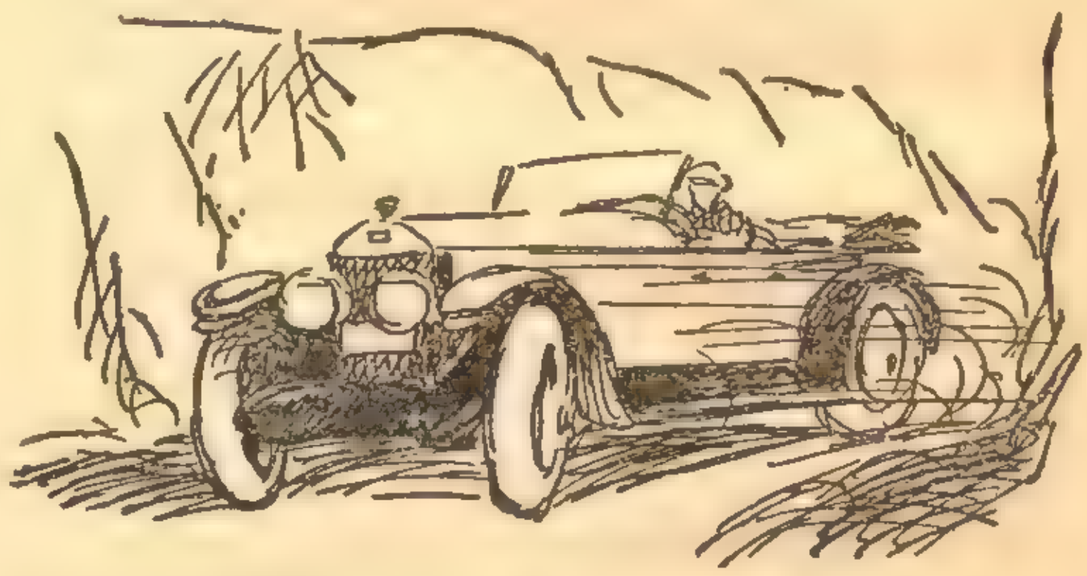
"Now wait a minute, Harry. I'm not going the way you think." He sat on the edge of his chair, elbows on knees. "You're always craving a thrill, Harry. Maybe I can fix one for you, this week-end."

"At a house party?"

"At a house party. Now listen——"

IT WAS spring, emphatically. Forsythia was everywhere in bloom, flaringly yellow, and iris and tulips were pushing tentative spouts above the earth. Suburbanites were scraping rust off their lawn-mowers and hedge clippers, and anxiously examining flannels for evidences of moth activity.

"Sweet piece of road," Harry Stork



said. "Isn't it along here somewhere that your master-mind lives?"

"Yes. Take it easy, and we might get a glimpse of him."

Harry throttled down to a mere fifty-five miles an hour.

"I had always understood," he said, "that this fellow was trusted by the underworld, which was why he was able to make these secret deals. And that the reason the cops were always trying to get some-

thing on him was just because they were jealous—because he made them look foolish."

"They don't like him," Ken said. "But that trusted-by-the-underworld stuff is just part of the legend the man has built up around himself. The underworld doesn't trust anybody."

"But what is this man, anyway? What's his game, that you're so mysterious about? If he's such a crook, and the cops all know it, why is it that he's allowed to be in business as a private detective?"

"Because he's smart. He's got a perfectly legitimate business, and he undoubtedly makes the $20,000 a year he declares when he fills out his income tax statement —and does it honestly. But he specializes in the return of stolen jewelry, and that's where the dirty work comes in.

"Here's what he does. He hangs around rich people, spots some giddy woman who likes to clank her gemmery in public, gets a line on her, finds out everything he can about her habits and household, and then calls in a professional thief. In other words, he fingers the job.

"The thief steals the stuff. The police and the insurance dicks run around getting nowhere, and finally the insurance people call in the Jules Marot Agency. Marot says he'll see what he can do He waits a little while. Then he appears with a story about contacting a representative of the thief, and says this person is willing to turn the jewelry back for say thirty cents on the dollar. On a no-questions-asked basis, of course."

"Then how does the thief benefit?"

"Well, suppose the stolen stuff is insured for $100,000, and worth it. The thief ordinarily couldn't get more than $7,000 or $8,000 on that, because he'd have to turn it over to a hot ice pusher, who'd have to turn it over to a layer, who'd turn it over to a fence, who'd either have to hold it a long while before he dared peddle it, or else he'd have to take the stones out, maybe break them up, and melt the mountings. Also, bringing that many men into the thing increases the danger of a squeal, or a hijacking party. But dealing through Marot, the thief could get $30,000. Or that's what would be reported. Actually he'd get perhaps half of that—which is still twice what he could expect by ordinary methods. Marot, of course, keeps the rest. The victim gets her stones back, intact. The insurance company is out $30,000, which is better than being out $100,000. And Marot not only has his cut with the thief but also a legitimate consultant's fee from the insurance company."

HARRY STORK stuck out his lower jaw, and raised and lowered his chin.

"I begin to understand. And now you've got me really curious to see this man. If we pass him, shall I stop?"

"No. He might recognize me."

"If he does," Harry Stork chuckled, "he is smart!" He looked admiringly at his companion. "Honestly, Ken, I'd always thought disguises consisted of false beards and grease paint. But you haven't done anything except change your clothes and comb your hair differently and put on those glasses—and you're another man!"

Ken didn't smile. A smile seemed incalculably remote from this grave, highly proper young man who sat beside Harry Stork. Ken wore a black cutaway, gray-striped trousers, black shoes, a derby. As his friend said, he seemed a different man. His expression was different. He held his head and shoulders differently. The very way he folded his hands in his lap was unlike the ordinary Ken Barclay. Even his voice seemed the voice of another man: it was higher, and slightly nasal, and he had an English accent now.

"Jeeves himself! Ken, I don't see how you do it!"

"Thank you, sir."

"Practicing?"

"Beg podden, sir?"

"You know, I envy you, Ken. I'd like to get a job like that myself, only the folks would howl. It must be a kick."

"It is, sometimes. But a lot of it's ordinary hard work."

"Well, I hope we catch some of the excitement this week-end. I brought along a pistol."

"Take it easy here. I think we're near where—— Yes! there it is! And there's Jules Marot himself!"

The famous private detective wore wine-colored corduroys, a blue-gray flannel shirt, blue gardening gloves. He knelt by the side of a flower-bed, a small weed-cutter in his hand, and he was gazing at the soft, nicely-sifted earth with all the rapture of an enthusiast who would, if he could, sit right there all day. Behind him a Negro was rolling the neat little lawn. Beyond was Marot's house, a quaint, very pretty brick bungalow covered with ivy; there were windowboxes in all the windows, and the front porch was thick with potted plants.

"He looks like a sissy to me."

"He's the most dangerous criminal in America today," Ken said.

THEY went through Morristown, around the square, and turned west.

"And you really think somebody's going to try to steal Mrs. Harris's sapphires?"

"I'm convinced of it. Marot did some work for her a few weeks ago—planted a maid there to mislay an earring, and then got himself called in to find it—and that would have given him an excellent chance to box the place. Mrs. Harris is notoriously careless, and absent-minded, and those sapphires are insured for $150,000. When they're missed, Marot will be there even before the cops—if the cops are summoned at all. He'll have a chance to cover up any mistakes his man might have made."

"Well, aren't you going to prevent the theft?"

"No, indeed! I want them to be stolen! I want to see who does it, and find out where he goes afterward. I don't care whether Mrs. Harris loses her stones. All I want is to corner Marot."

"And you won't interfere with the thief himself?"

"I'll watch him. I'll shadow him, or have him shadowed. And eventually he'll be arrested. But I'm certainly not going to grab him red-handed and give Marot a chance to slide out from under."

"Maybe the man would talk?"

"Marot doesn't pick men like that. Though if worst comes to worst, we might get something out of this one on a threat to send him to the electric chair. Because there's a murder mixed up in this case, Harry."

"Oh-oh! I think I'm going to enjoy this week-end!"

Ken, for the first time that morning, flashed his familiar smile. But fifteen minutes later, when they rolled up the drive toward the Harris mansion, Ken's face was stony and he was again silent, self-effacing. When the car came to a stop under a glittering porte-cochere he hurried out, trotted around to the driver's side, and held open the door for his friend. Then he turned to the bags.

Harry said:

"Be careful with those tennis racquets, Chisholm."

"Very good, sir."

Half a dozen guests were on the veranda. They waved to Harry Stork, and shouted greetings. Mrs. Wendell Harris, a large and good-humored widow, came fluttering toward him, both arms outstretched. She had a screechy, nervous voice, very loud.

"So good of you to come! And I'm so sorry you couldn't persuade that nice Barclay boy to be here. I was hoping we could get him to tell us his experiences as a secret service detective. Isn't that a new man?"

"Victor's got an attack of pleurisy, and I got this chap from the agency to fill in. Name's Chisholm."

"Well, Arthur will help him with those bags and things. I'm giving you the room you asked for—right next to my own."

"Thanks. That's very good of you."

"You'll have a nice view of our little patch of lawn," she screamed, referring to the twenty-odd acres of formal landscaping which swept down toward an unseen highway. "And I'll put your valet with one of my chauffeurs, over the garage."

Ken Barclay's most difficult moment came when he saw the gorilla. Hanker looked so uncomfortable! He stood near the main doorway and scowled at Ken, who trembled with repressed laughter; and for all the white flannels and gabardine sport coat, and the brown-and-white shoes, he was every inch a cop.

"Good old Harris," chuckled Harry Stork on the way upstairs. "She would have to have a detective, to show everybody she's accustomed to people who have scads of jewelry! Did you spot the lummox, Ken?"

"Beg podden, sir?"

"Oh, go to hell!"

"Very good, sir."

IN AN apartment over the garage, Arthur, the footman, introduced Ken to a sour-faced blond in chauffeur's livery.

"You'll be rooming with Nelson. This guy's a valley, Nelson."

Nelson muttered, "Pleased to meet yuh," and scowled.

Ken bowed and said: "Chawmed. I'm sure we'll hit it off top-hole."

Nelson sat watching while Ken unpacked. He seemed to disapprove. He seemed to disapprove of everything in the world, but especially of Ken.

"So you're an Englishman, huh?"

"Ah, yes. Quite."

"Got any dough on you?"

"Beg podden?"

"Dough. Money. Mazuma."

"Ah! Ah, yes! Yes, I have a trifle. Why do you awsk?"

"Some of the boys plan to bend over ivory tonight. Downstairs, behind where the cars are. In case you're interested."

"Ah—I'm afraid I don't quite understand."

"Craps! Don't you ever shoot craps in England?"

"Why, I—I'm not much of a one for gunning, no. I don't believe I've ever shot a crap. So sorry."

Nelson bellowed with laughter, throwing his head back. He went out, to tell the boys about this crazy Englishman.

The crazy Englishman was thinking that there was something teasingly familiar about this man Nelson. Ken seldom forgot a face. He didn't think he had ever seen Nelson before, but it was possible that he'd seen Nelson's picture. It was part of his job to remember pictures.

On impulse he locked the door and searched the room. Nelson's possessions were few, and except for a belt buckle with the initials "L.F.S." and a full clip for a Colt .45 automatic, they were harmless.

Well, the belt might have been given to Nelson by some former employee. As

for the permit, it was possible that Nelson had a local permit to carry a gun in the car he drove.

Just the same, the man's face was familiar. Ken looked around. There would be plenty of fingerprints . . . but the trick was to find a full set.

He went to the metal cover over the radiator, just under the window. The sort of thing any man would lean on when he looked out of the window. Ken took his little black box, selected a brush, a phial of gray powder. In a few minutes he had

raised a perfect set of prints. They couldn't have been better if they'd been taken in a police station with roller and ink. He examined them with a glass, jotting a series of numbers and letters on a piece of paper. Then with his dampened hankerchief he wiped out the prints. He went for a walk.

Some of the guests were playing tennis, some were playing croquet. Mrs. Wendell Harris fluttered from group to group, shrieking. She was stupid and noisy, and vulgarly ostentatious, but a good-hearted woman, and popular.

Harry Stork saw his friend, and smiled.

"Fixed up all right, Chisholm?"

"Quite comfortable, sir. Thank you, sir."

In a lower voice Harry said:

"There's a man named Carstairs here."

"Thank you, sir. I'm taking a bit of a stroll, sir, but I'll return in ample time to lay out your dinner clothes."

And Ken walked on, erect, unsmiling.

HE QUIT the estate by one of the main gates, and walked down the highway a short distance. Around the first curve, pulled far off on the side, was a low fast roadster. A man at the wheel, smoking a cigarette, scarcely glanced at Ken. But Ken stopped, leaned in.

"There's a chauffeur whose pan looks like one I ought to know. Here's his Henry. I don't want to use one of the house phones, so will you drive back and get this off for me?"

The man straightened.

"Gee, Ken! I never would have known you!"

"Better send the wire in your name. And if the answer says this is somebody I ought to know about, phone it to Mr. Harry Stork."

"Will it be all right to leave here for a while?"

"Yes. Nothing's going to happen until tonight anyway."

"And what's going to happen then?"

A couple of horsemen came out of a lane. Their mounts gladly stopped, doing high, nervous little dance steps, while the horsemen frowned at the pavement as though they thought it had no right to be there.

Ken bowed.

"Thank you so much, sir. Very kind of you, I'm sure. I think I shall be able to find my way back now, sir."

He returned to the main gate. But he didn't go up the drive. Instead he sauntered along one of the narrow paths. It was pleasant, shady, spring-like. Ken, who knew that he would be up all night, welcomed its restfulness. But presently he began to frown. He walked fast, then slowly. When he came to a summer house he went through it, wheeled, scampered around behind some rhododendron bushes. A moment later Hanker went through the summer house.

Ken sighed, shook his head. He went into the summer house, supposing himself safe for a time. He could hear gleeful shouts from the direction of the croquet ground, but there was nobody in sight. He folded his arms, leaned back on the rustic bench, and deliberately went to sleep.

He was always able to sleep like this—whenever he wished and for as long as he wished. And he was a very light sleeper. Which was why he heard Hanker coming back. But it was too late. Hanker had seen him.

"Chawming day, sir."

Hanker said slowly:

"I've lamped you before somewheres."

"It scarcely seems possible, sir, if I may say so. I've only been in your country a short while."

"I've seen you somewheres," Hanker repeated, glowering.

"In London perhaps? You've been to London, sir?"

"No, and it wasn't in London either, because I never been there. Your name's supposed to be Chisholm, ain't it?"

Ken summoned dignity. "My name is Chisholm, sir!"

"Yeah. And mine's John D. Rockefeller. Where's your passport?"

"I'm not aware that you have any right to awsk. I haven't it with me. I am only temporarily in Mr. Stork's service, you understand?"

"Yeah. Damn temporarily, I bet. Well, you must have something in your pockets, and I guess I'll take a look."

Ken stood up.

"This is an outrage, sir! If you dare lay your hands——"

"Just a minute, guy! I said I was going to look!"

Now among the things Ken did have in his pockets were his pistol and his credentials, and he didn't choose to have Hanker see these. So he deliberately slapped Hanker's face.

"Hey!"

Hanker lunged with a thick right arm. It was what Ken had anticipated. Ken stepped aside, caught the arm, jerked it forward, and thrust out his left leg. The big detective struck the rustic rail, crashed through, and went tumbling headlong into rhododendrons.

When he emerged, a moment later, swearing horribly, Ken was not in sight.

HARRY STORK, when Ken was dressing him for dinner, complained:

"Well, so far it's been just like any other country party."

"Things will happen," Ken promised serenely. "The batwing, sir?"

"You know, Ken, if I didn't happen to know you as well as I do, I'd say you were cuckoo when you think there's anything wrong about that chap Carstairs. I met him this afternoon. Nice fellow."

"Do you think so, sir? Your coat, sir."

Harry scowled, put on the coat, snapped a handkerchief into the breast pocket, and went downstairs.

Ken's strategy was simple. He wished to have a good look at Mrs. Harris's bedroom, to mark the windows and their locks, the bureau, the jewel case or cases, the closets. Later, when everybody had retired, and Mrs. Harris had presumably put away her trinkets, he would slip into her room and hide there. Perhaps Carstairs would not come? Ken must take that chance. If Carstairs did come, Ken would permit him to go about his larceny uninterrupted. After that there were several possible courses of action. Carstairs might bolt, which wasn't likely. He might pass the jewels to a confederate. Or he might sit tight, confident that he would not be suspected, and that, even if his baggage and person were searched his partner Jules Marot would do the searching.

The third course seemed the most probable. In the case of the first or second, Ken himself would not pursue—unless Carstairs or his confederate tried to escape by foot. Loaded and ready, near a window of Harry Stork's room, was a Very pistol. Fired out of that window, it would send a flare which, because the house was on higher ground than the road, would be seen by other Bureau of Investigation agents waiting in two automobiles not far from each of the entrances of the estate. The jewels would be followed to their hiding place, and that place would be watched night and day. The next move would be up to Jules Marot.

If anything went wrong, if the jewels were lost, it would still be possible to arrest George Gulick, alias Carstairs. Gulick was even now being sought by the New York police in connection with the murder of his former bodyguard; but only Ken Barclay knew that Gulick was using the name of Carstairs and living in East Sixty-second Street, and only Ken knew that Jules Marot, immediately after a fight with Sam Lefferts, had made a telephone call to Gulick. That information surely would justify a short affidavit against Gulick, and he could be questioned for at least twenty-four hours. He had a bad record, and could not afford to face a murder charge. It was possible that he might squeal on Marot.

Ken ate a quick dinner in the servants' quarters, and then hurried back upstairs. The guests were having cocktails in the drawing room. A gay babble rose to the

second floor hall; but that hall itself was otherwise quiet.

Ken knocked at Mrs. Harris's door. He knocked again, listening. There was no answer, and no light shone under the door.

Ken went to Harry Stork's room.

This room too was dark, but when Ken swung open the door he caught a glimpse of a swift-moving shadow. Only a glimpse. There was no sound.

Somebody, some large man, had dodged to one side so as not to be silhouetted against the vague light from the windows. Ken already had closed the door. He crouched, his right hand reaching for his pistol, his left for the electric light switch.

Then something moved. Something whammed hard against the door just above Ken's head. And the big shadow, blurred and misshapen, loomed in front of him again, charging.

There was no time for the gun, even if Ken had been eager to use it. He straightened, lashing out with a long right. His fist hit a face. He stepped aside, hooked a left into a large, soft body. There was a grunt. A fist caught his right temple, knocked him off balance for an instant. He stumbled upon the edge of the rug, waved his arms wildly, crashed. His left cheekbone struck a leg of the bed.

It stunned him. He heard the man leaving the room, but it was a full minute before he was able to get to his feet.

THE hall was deserted. The sound of laughter and gay talk, the clink of glasses, the clatter of a cocktail shaker, floated up the staircase; but there was nobody in sight.

Ken went back into the bedroom. A window, he found, was open, but the Very pistol was untouched, and nothing seemed disturbed.

Then there was a step in the hall, a hand on the doorknob. Ken snaked out his gun and knelt behind the end of the bureau. The door opened. The light was switched on. Harry Stork stood there, blinking.

Ken rose, quietly putting away his pistol.

"Hello. They still lapping up drinks down there?"

"What in the world is the idea, Ken? Why the artillery?"

"I wasn't sure who you were going to be."

He went into the bathroom, and with a wet towel started to staunch the flow of blood from his cheek. Harry Stork followed him, and stared at Ken's reflection with brown, wondering eyes.

"Lord! here I was hoping to get a thrill helping you chase thieves, and everything goes along just as usual—as far as I'm concerned! But you seem to be getting all sorts of action!"

"You had a visitor."

"Who was it?"

"I didn't see him."

"It certainly wasn't this Carstairs chap you talk about, because I just left him downstairs."

"No, it wouldn't be Carstairs. It was a bigger man."

Harry shook his head. He wandered back into the bedroom. From the floor

near the hall door he picked up a blackjack and stared thoughtfully at it, wagging it. Then he carried it into the bathroom.

"This yours?"

"Well, it was given to me. But it missed. Might have cracked my skull if it'd been an inch or two lower."

Harry groaned.

"I certainly wish I could be in on some of these doings!"

Ken smiled his old, unvaletlike smile.

"What brings you up here, by the way?"

"Oh, I almost forgot that. I have a

telephone message for you. Somebody who wouldn't give his name said to tell you that your friend is Art Guntz, automobile bandit and mayhem artist, and he's wanted as a fugitive from the McAlester Penitentiary in Oklahoma."

Ken said, "Well, well, well." He came out of the bathroom. "You'd better get below, Harry. They'll be missing you."

"Well, for Pete's sake, let me know next time the fight starts!"

When his friend had gone Ken borrowed his tennis shoes, put a flashlight into a woollen sock, and went into the next room. He locked the door behind him, against the possibility of being surprised by the maid. Then he went to the windows, meaning to leave one of them open so that in an emergency he could scamper back to Harry's room by way of the veranda roof.

He found one of the two windows already open, and he examined it. It had been pried open from the outside, apparently by means of an ordinary jimmy, so that its lock was snapped. First it had been necessary to get the screen open, but this was simple. Two small slits had been cut in the screen just above the two little inside latches. The rest could have been done by a slipped-in finger.

But there was something odd about those slits . . . Ken examined them closely, with a glass. He even risked taking the flash out of the sock for a moment. And he learned that the tiny strands of cut screen were bent out, not in. He clucked his tongue, muttered "Careless," put the flash back.

IT TOOK him less than five minutes to make a thorough examination of the hostess's bedroom. The thing in which he was most interested was the jewel case which stood open on the dressing table. It was steel, but skilfully painted so that it resembled leather and polished wood. It was flat, oval, and very large, almost as large as the top of the dressing table. It had been specially built to contain the sapphire set, and its velvet cushions had spaces for the various pieces—large earrings, small earrings, four bangles, six rings, and an enormous quadruple necklace. Just now the only things in it were the small earrings, four of the rings, and two bangles.

There was only one drawer in the bureau large enough to hold this jewel case. It was unlocked and open, and empty.

Leaving everything as he had found it, Ken returned to Harry Stork's room, got into his valet's shoes again, and went for a walk.

The night held a firm chill, and the garden smelled earthy, sappy. The sky was dark, the clouds very low. It might start to rain at any moment. Ken found a bench hidden by shrubbery and made himself comfortable. He allowed himself another hour of sleep. Then he got up, instantly wide-awake, and began to prowl.

There was somebody else prowling in this garden. Somebody not as quiet about it. Ken, after a time, saw the lumbrous Hanker cruising up one path and down another, looking very angry, and sillier than ever with a bruised right eye. Hanker met one of the assistant gardeners.

"Seen that guy Chisholm? The valet for this guy Stork? Well, if you should, let me know. That guy's a crook, and I happen to know it."

"He's a crook, eh?"

"Yeah, and I think he's something worse. I've had my eyes on him ever since he came here, but I just remembered a little while ago where it was I'd seen him before. He'd just been fighting with a man who got mysteriously murdered a little while after that."

"Holy gee!"

"But keep that part of it under your hat, see?"

"Oh, sure . . . sure!"

And the gardener hurried away, toward the garage.

Ken thought: Now the whole service

staff will be looking for me. He stared grimly at the skinned knuckles of his right fist. He went back to the garage. There was a crap game in the rear, as Nelson had promised, but though the play was lively and the crowd a good one, Ken, peering through a window, saw nothing of Nelson himself. He went upstairs—the door was on the side of the garage building and it was not necessary for him to go near the crap game—and found the door of the room he shared with Nelson open. He switched on the lights.

A chair was overturned. Ken's collars had been swept off the dresser. And in the very middle of the floor, fresh and new and glittery, was a splash of blood.

Ken opened one of Nelson's drawers. The extra clip for the automatic was no longer there.

The sound of the crap game below had ceased, and somebody was coming up the stairs. Five or six men, judging from the sound. Ken heard the assistant gardener's thrilled whispered:

"There's a light up there, and it wasn't there a little while ago. Now let's take it easy. This detective said this guy was a dangerous gunman. We don't want to ——"

KEN ran to the window, kicked out the screen, climbed over, held the sill for an instant with both hands—and dropped.

He was too good a gymnast to lose his balance. He landed easily on gravel, and swung around. Next to him was a touring car, a black Lincoln with the top down. He started to run around this. But somebody grabbed his right arm; and somebody else grabbed his left.

"Wait a minute, fella! What's the rush?"

Ken jerked backward, falling, carrying both men with him. He wrenched himself free, rolled a short distance, sprang to his feet.

One of the men was up. The other was on his knees.

"So that's the kind of a guy——"

Ken chopped the sentence short with a whole-hearted uppercut which snapped the man's head back. The man teetered on his heels. Ken pushed him, and he tumbled backward over his companion.

Ken vaulted into the tonneau of the Lincoln.

For half an hour there was hubbub around that car. But it was a subdued hubbub. The servants were not sure of themselves. They were afraid to break up the party at the house and rile their mistress with wild stories. Some of them insisted that she should be told, and that the police should be summoned. They had seen the blood on the floor of Nelson's bedroom, and they believed that Nelson had been killed. Nelson himself they couldn't seem to find. Nor could they find Ken Barclay, who lay flat, listening, a few feet away. They beat the bushes; they spread out and searched the grounds; but nobody thought to look into the car. The two men Ken had knocked down had not seen him vault into the tonneau.

"I tell you Nelson's been murdered! We ought to report it!"

"Then Old Lady Harris'd be sure to find out about the game, and she'd be sorer'n a pup. Anyway, all we got to go on is the say-so of a guy we can't even find."

"That's what we ought to do! Get hold of that detective!"

"He's probably out chasing the Englishman somewhere."

"Maybe that's where Nelson is too?"

"I think we ought to find Nelson. Or if we don't, we ought to report it right away!"

"And maybe get fired?"

It was finally agreed that unless Nelson or the private detective appeared within half an hour, with a satisfactory explanation, they would report the whole business to Mrs. Harris. Many of them weren't satisfied with this decision, but they agreed to stick together. They drifted back into the garage, chattering in low voices.

KEN slipped out of the back seat. He too was wondering where Hanker and Art Guntz, alias Nelson, were. But for the moment, the house seemed the safest place for him.

He prayed, as he slipped in by a back door, that one of the missing men would soon reappear. If the scuffle were reported Ken would be obliged to reveal his identity —and make a fool of himself. His whole plan of campaign would be ruined. To be sure, he could cause the arrest of a fugitive from justice. But again, could he? Maybe Nelson would take alarm and wouldn't return at all? In any event, his arrest would do little to offset the scandal. Mrs. Wendell Harris would be furious. The Chief would be furious, for special agents of the Bureau of Investigation are not supposed to do some of the things

Ken had been doing—and be caught at them. And worse of all, Jules Marot would be warned.

He ascended to the second floor by a back stairway, meeting no one. He entered Harry Stork's room.

Hanker stood spread-legged in front of the bed, an automatic in his hand.

"It's about time you came," Hanker said.

Ken laughed quietly, without any notable mirth.

"You fool," he said.

"So I'm a fool, am I?"

Blood pounded in Hanker's face, which was dark red, almost black, and sweat rolled down his fat cheeks. His eye was badly puffed and discolored, his lips were puffed too. He took a step toward Ken.

"Of course you're a fool! You get it into your head that I'm a crook, and you go pussyfooting around shooting off your mouth to everybody you meet, and then when you can't find me you go to my room. And you start to search it. And somebody comes in and finds you there."

"Yeah, I went to your room out over the garage! And you came in!"

"I did! Do you see any marks on my face? This man gave you a shiner, didn't he? And before he ran out on you, or you ran out on him, whichever it was, do you mean to say you didn't get in a return crack?"

Hanker was leaning closer, peering, puzzled.

"You got a cut on your cheek there."

"You didn't hit this man in the cheek, did you?"

"No. I smacked him one good square one on the nose. I'd swear to that much, even if I couldn't see him. I felt it."

"Sure. And he felt it too. And he bled all over the place, the way those big blond fellows with high complexions always do."

"Well then, if it wasn't you——"

"Mr. Marot," Ken said severely, "will be sore as all-get-out when I tell him about this."

It frightened the big man. His gun was lowered a little. Ken's cool assurance, his contempt for the weapon, were disconcerting.

"Wait a minute. I don't get this. Who are you, anyway?"

Ken shrugged. He spread his hands as though about to explain something to a backward child. Carelessly he stepped closer.

"Now look. You come here under orders to——"

THEN KEN sidestepped and swung. It took Hanker completely by surprise, and in a way it was a dirty trick. But Ken had been able to think of nothing else. Hanker wouldn't stay bluffed very long.

Ken swung with his left, a perfect solar plexus punch, lifting it. Hanker went

"oomp!" and went over on the bed, momentarily paralyzed. Ken sprang on top of him pushing down the gun.

The gun exploded once. Ken had shoved the muzzle against the bed clothes, and the kick was terrific. It shocked Hanker's arm, shocked both of Ken's arms. It seemed to make the whole bed jump. The wonder was that the big pistol held together. Hot gases and unburned powder, denied their customary exit, flared back through the ejector slot. Hanker squealed. Perhaps he would have shrieked —but Ken jammed an elbow into his mouth.

Big man though he was, Hanker half fainted from the pain. The whole outside of his right hand was scorched.

It gave Ken a chance to kick the gun to the floor. And presently, before Hanker realized what had happened, Ken was binding his wrists and ankles with pillow slips.

"I'll apologize later," Ken gasped.

Small flames were making an ever-widening circle in the bedspread, and the room was filling with black, stinking smoke. Ken beat out the flames. He opened windows. He went back to Hanker and treated the seared hand with sunburn ointment pilfered from Harry's toilet case.

When Harry Stork returned to his room, a few hours later, his friend of college days was seated by one of the windows smoking a cigarette. Harry gawped at the ravished bed.

"I was forced to use it as a sort of Maxim silencer," Ken explained. "Shall I undress you, sir?"

"I thought you were going to ring me in on some of this trouble?"

"This was an emergency case. Didn't have time to call you. Will you put on your dressing robe, sir?"

"Never mind the valeting! For God's sake, tell me what happened! Nobody heard a sound, downstairs." He dropped into a chair. "The only thing I did hear," he amended, "was one servant whispering to another, a little while ago, that outside——"

He stopped staring at the large automatic on the bureau.

"Part of the trouble," Ken explained. "What did the servant say?"

"Ken, for a lad who's always as quiet as you are, you're the maddest person who ever walked the face of this earth!"

"Sure. What did the servant say?"

"Why, he said there'd been a fight back of the garage, and that everybody was looking for a man who was supposed to be a desperate criminal. I kept quiet about it because I didn't know whether or not it was some of your work. Was it?"

"In a way. Anybody else hear this? Carstairs?"

"No, I'm sure he didn't. I don't think anybody else did. The servant said everything was quiet now anyway. Said somebody by the name of Nelson had come back and reported that it was just a friendly fight."

"So Nelson came back, eh?"

"And now will you tell me what——"

Again Harry Stork broke off, this time because of a thumping and muffled pounding from the clothes closet.

"A prisoner," Ken explained. "Take a look. He won't bite. He can't."

The sight of the recumbent and linen-swathed Hanker at first struck Harry to silence. Then it made him roar with laughter. He fell back into a chair, laughing so hard that he couldn't say a word.

Ken, smiling, closed and locked the closet door.

"He won't keep that up," Ken predicted. "He's had a hard day, and he's tired. Besides, nobody can hear him but us."

STILL, Ken was troubled about Hanker. It wouldn't be possible to keep him in there indefinitely, and as soon as he was freed he would call his employer. Perhaps, Ken reflected, the best thing to do would be to catch George Gulick red-handed after all.

"I know it's useless begging you to tell a chap anything," Harry gasped at last,

"but what's next on the night's program?"

"Well, when I hear Mrs. Harris go to bed—it sounds as if she's in her bathroom now—I'm going to pay her a little visit."

"You're certainly not going to break into her room!"

"I don't have to. It's been broken into already—from the inside." He handed his friend the Very pistol. "If you really want to help, sit by this window and hold this thing, and if you see a car start down for the highway shoot it off. Be sure you keep the window and the screen open all the time too! I might have to come back in a hurry."

He drew a black linen cap from under his vest and put it on his head, pulling it low. He turned up his coat, pinning it in place so that no part of his collar or shirt was visible. He put on tennis shoes.

"Best of luck to you," Harry whispered.

The roof was of tin, with only a slight slope. Ken moved cautiously, trying each step. Next to the window with the smashed lock he squatted, and for a long time he didn't stir.

Glowering clouds seemed intent upon getting right down among the trees, and the threatened rain, long delayed, was beginning—one drop, big and round and warm—and then another—and then, after a long pause, another. There was a far-away mutter of thunder.

A car went by, very fast, on the highway. The hum of its engine, and the soprano whirr of its tires, blended into a receding whine.

Mrs. Wendell Harris, who was not as young as she used to be, could be expected to sleep well. A conscientious hostess, she had been up since dawn, and busy preparing for her guests; and it was now almost two.

Ken, once he had made up his mind that everything was clear, went into the room swiftly. He left the window open, as he had found it. He glided without any hesitation to the clothes closet opposite the big four-poster bed. He had previously selected this as the best place from which to watch window, door, bed and bureau. Also it would permit him to move a bit, and thus keep his muscles from getting stiff and cramped.

He couldn't know the time, for he had brought no watch. Even so slight a thing as the ticking of a watch might betray him. He would remain in this closet, one eye fixed at the inch-open door, until dawn came—or until something more disturbing occurred.

The odor of Mrs. Wendell Harris was all about him. It was an odor of parties, of good cigarettes, fine brandy, expensive French perfume. He stirred, when he ventured to stir at all, amid velvet and gauzy silks and the satin-padded ends of dress hangers.

So he waited.

WHEN the intruder came Ken did not hear him, did not even see him at first. He only knew that somebody else was in the room because of the faint movement of a wisp of silk against his cheek. The hall door had been open for an instant. That was all.

Then something imponderable and without shape, a blurred thing of darkness

against darkness, flittered past the foot of the bed. It went to the bureau, it seemed to slide into itself, so that it became half its former indefinite height.

Mrs. Wendell Harris turned over.

She didn't turn slowly, nor yet twitchingly, as a sleeping person might be expected to do. To Ken, with ears made keenly sensitive by listening to silence, it seemed that she turned like a person with a purpose. She got up on one elbow.

She couldn't have heard anything, because neither visitor had made the slightest sound. Instinct? But if she sensed

the presence of somebody else in the bedroom now, why hadn't she sensed Ken Barclay's presence?

The shadow crouching by the bureau dissolved. Behind the end of the bureau, Ken figured. It was the only place the man could have gone.

Mrs. Harris looked at her bedside clock, which had a luminous dial. Then a chair clittered. She lighted a lamp.

Ken pressed back among the silks and velvets. He heard Mrs. Harris get out of bed. She started to scream. She ran for the hall, her bare feet pattering wildly.

"I've been robbed! The window! Help! Burglars! I've been robbed!"

Ken put his face to the inch-open door. The largest bureau drawer was open—and empty. The shadow, material now, was dashing for the window.

"Hold it!"

He had his pistol out, but not aimed. He had not expected any resistance. But when Gulick heard the command it was almost as though he had been waiting for it. He twisted, and a revolver glittered against his dark bathrobe. The revolver cracked twice. It split the air of the room like a streak of lightning. Ken's right shoulder stung, on top, as though touched by a red-hot poker; and the gun fell from his hand. It was only a shock of pain. A nerve shock. He stooped, picked up the gun, and ran to the window.

Gulick was across the roof by that time. He slipped over the edge, wet from rain, and dropped. Ken heard him hit the shrubbery which banked the veranda.

"Stop!"

Ken ran to the edge of the roof, saw Gulick running for deeper shrubbery on the other side of the drive.

"Stop, or I'll kill you!"

KEN could have done that. But he preferred to have Gulick alive. His shoulder didn't hurt now. He knew it couldn't be anything but a flesh wound. It would not spoil his marksmanship. The light was poor. He fired once at Gulick's flying feet. Gulick swirled around in a rattle of stones, and fell flat. But he managed to drag himself into sheltering shadows, his right leg useless behind him.

Ken ducked. The revolver cracked.

Harry Stork came scrambling out on the roof.

"What is it, Ken?"

Ken yelled:

"Down!"

Harry dropped. Again a crack from the evergreens on the far side of the drive, and this time a window behind Harry Stork flew to pieces.

"That caveman's loose, Ken! He's just getting out, and his gun's back there! Shall I——"

"Never mind him! Crawl to the far end of the roof and watch a clump of spruce just beyond the drive. Don't expose yourself! If the man in there tries to make a break, let him have it in the legs. In the legs, understand?"

Windows were opening everywhere, and doors were opening too, and people were asking wild questions. Mrs. Wendell Harris, who had fallen in a swoon in the hallway just outside her bedroom, now got to her knees and started to scream again.

In all this noise, Ken, bending low and running for the end of the roof farthest from George Gulick, did not hear the gorilla Hanker at the window. But he caught a flash of Hanker as he sped past. And an instant later he heard the terrific boom of Hanker's big automatic. Ken was scrabbling over the edge by that time, and he felt the roofing shiver under his hands as the bullet ricochetted. He felt little chunks of paint flick against his cheek: the bullet had scraped them loose and sent them flying.

Ken muttered, "Oh, that fool!" and dropped.

He fell through bushes into soft earth. Arms in front of him, and staying close to the veranda, he pushed through more bushes to the place where Gulick had fallen. The earth was trampled there, and

the shrubbery torn, but there was no sign of the jewel case.

Now he was in Gulick's line of fire. The evergreens shuddered. The revolver spoke. Ken went to one knee. He heard Harry Stork, above, fire twice.

Then, incredibly, Hanker came bounding out of the front door. He was waving his gun and roaring like a wounded bull.

Ken yelled, "Keep down, you idiot!"

Hanker heard him, swerved. But the man was stark mad! All he knew was Ken. He raised his gun.

Again from the shadows the revolver cracked. George Gulick didn't know who this big fellow was either, and he didn't care. All men were his enemies now.

Hanker's gun exploded, tearing jagged splinters from the veranda just above Ken's head. Hanker spun around, staggered backward, sat on the steps. The revolver cracked again.

THIS much even Hanker was able to comprehend: That somebody was firing at him from those spruce trees. He charged.

He might have the brain of a mosquito, but he was packed to the brim with brute courage. He would have charged a nest of machine guns. He had forgotten about Ken now. He was running for the evergreens, and emptying his gun as he ran.

He didn't quite reach them. He fell in the drive, right arm outstretched, like a man burlesquing a homeplate slide.

Nor was there any further sound from the evergreens. Nobody could have survived for long the volley of slugs Hanker had poured into that place.

Ken called, "Enough, Georgie?"

The revolver, shiny, glittering, was pushed out into the drive. Ken straightened, went to it, walking past Hanker without a glance.

George Gulick, alias Carstairs, was on his back, coughing a little, and dying. Pain had drawn his thin features tight, but the dark eyes, under the thin high brows, glared with a very live hatred.

"I'm curtains . . . plenty."

Ken patted the man's pajamas and bathrobe, sometimes getting his hands wet with blood; for Gulick was a soggy mass of wounds.

He said, "No worse than you did to Sam Lefferts."

"He had it coming." Gulick began to cough again. After a moment he snarled, "You're not looking for sapphires, I hope?"

"Where did you put them? You didn't have time——"

"I never got them! They weren't there!"

"Why not tell the truth before you die?"

"I tell you they weren't there! That's the dumb part of it! That and the way the dame acted was what made me leery that I'd been trapped, which is why I blasted."

He squeezed his lips shut. Blood was forcing its way out of his mouth, at the corners; and presently it began to gush from his nose too.

HARRY STORK was calling questions from the roof. Hanker, flat in the drive, was moaning. Everybody else in the world appeared to be shouting or slamming a door, or doing both. But even above this racket Ken Barclay heard the whip of an automobile started.

That Lincoln! Why had it been left outside, away from all other cars? Why had Mrs. Harris roused herself and almost immediately started to scream that she'd been robbed? Who was it who had forced open Mrs. Harris's window screen from the inside, and then beat a retreat through Harry Stork's room when Ken knocked at Mrs. Harris's door? Where, if it wasn't in the bureau, and if it wasn't anywhere on or about George Gulick, was the jewel case?

That self-starter was all the answers at once. Ken knew, abruptly, why his carefully laid plan had blown up.

Something had happened for which he had not made provision. A thing he had

not expected. George Gulick, who had been telling the truth with his dying breath, hadn't expected it either. Of course Hanker hadn't. Even that master strategist Jules Marot had never anticipated anything like this.

Mrs. Wendell Harris herself, in an attempt to cheat the insurance company, had staged a fake robbery!

But Mrs. Harris was a bungler, and now she was being double-crossed. The sound of the automobile starter told Ken that.

He started to run back toward the garage.

The Lincoln was in second gear when it swung around a curve and Ken saw it. The headlights were not on.

Ken put his gun in his mouth—the hot barrel stung his lips—and jumped for the running board. His feet missed this, but his hands caught the folded-down top. It almost jerked his arms out at the shoulders.

He got his chin against the top, swung his legs until they found the spare tires. He tried to crawl into the tonneau.

Perhaps Nelson sensed him there, or perhaps Nelson saw him in the mirror. Anyway, Nelson half-turned, placing the barrel of an automatic on the back of the seat. The car was in high and going very fast, spewing through gravel, rocking from side to side.

The automatic exploded. Nelson's gun hand jumped. He had only guessed, not dared to turn his head. But now, with the car on a short straightaway, he turned fully. He took aim.

Then he blinked, blinded, as everything was lit with a bright white flare. Harry Stork had discharged the Very pistol.

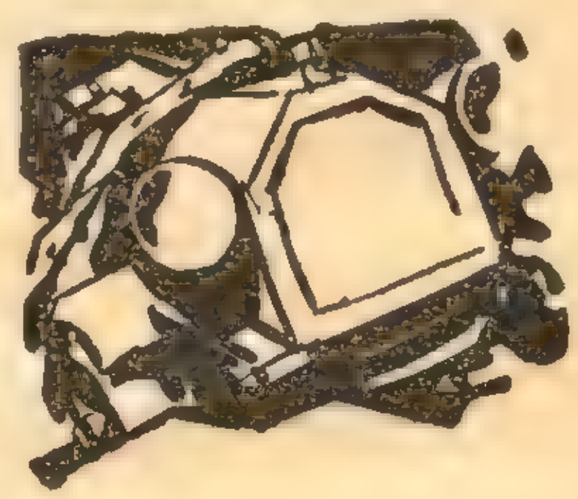
It might be that Nelson realized even in that wild moment that he was trapped —that the rocket was a signal to men who waited on the highway. He might have been taking a mad chance of driving across lawns to crash through a hedge beyond one of the gates.

Or it might be that in shifting himself for another shot at the man in back, he lost control.

Nobody was ever to know.

THE Lincoln went over a low embankment. It thudded, held firm, rushed on, swaying. It was going at a terrific rate of speed. The grass was wet with rain, and the car slid badly. Ken didn't know whether the brakes were on or whether Nelson was trying to fight the machine back to the drive. It splintered a small tree. The left wheels sideswiped a low stone wall, making a hideous screech. The car bumped, seemed to be trying to get back to that wall. The left front wheel struck a flower bed, very soft. The rear slammed against the wall again, much harder this time.

Ken pushed himself away, shoving with his feet at the same time. He felt the car



sink like a swift-dropping elevator cage. He landed on his back among some rose bushes. There is a lot in knowing how to fall. All Ken suffered was a stunning thump and a hundred thousand scratches.

He got to his feet, wondering what had happened to all that thunder which filled the earth for such a long, long while. For now there was a vast silence. And Ken almost regretted the thunder.

When he started to walk he found something in his mouth. He took it out. His gun! It made him feel foolish, but it reminded him of many things.

He cocked the gun.

Mrs. Wendell Harris's touring car had toppled over the wall, struck a bank, somersaulted at least twice across a terrace until it hit another and slighter wall; it had gone through this second wall, rolled over

at least once more, and lurched to rest against a self-consciously woodlandish pool in the middle of a rock garden. It was on its side. No sound came from it save the startled drip-drip-drip of a violated carburetor and the soft, uncertain hiss of raindrops.

Ken, when he saw Nelson, put the pistol away. Nelson had not been able to get free of the car, like Ken, and the wheel had crushed his chest. They found later that five ribs were broken and two of these had been driven back through his heart. His right leg was broken too. And his left wrist.

He dangled half out of the car, head down. The large, flat, oval jewel case which had been tucked under his tunic was crushed open by the crash, and its contents strewn down over the head of the driver. Even in that wan light they glowed magnificently; for they were wonderful stones, among the finest in the world.

One earring, one of the large ones, had got caught on Nelson's left ear. It looked very silly hanging there.

IT WAS near noon. Jules Marot came out on the veranda with a brisk, soft step. He wore fawn doeskins, a dark brown flannel tennis coat, jai-lai shoes, a terrycloth scarf. There was a small red carnation in his buttonhole, a red silk handkerchief in his breast pocket.

Ken was alone, smoking a cigarette and staring over the garden. The sun was out now. Mechanics were working on what remained of the touring car: they couldn't risk taking a wrecker down there, and the distance was too great for any block-and-tackle operation, so they were arguing whether it wouldn't be best to take the thing apart right where it was.

"I think we can keep any unfortunate suggestions from cropping into the report, as far as Mrs. Harris is concerned, don't you, Barclay?"

Ken smiled.

"That your job now? Keeping Mrs. Harris out of trouble?"

"It's always my job to guard the welfare of my clients. And of course," Marot said, looking sideways at Ken, "there really isn't any proof of any possible charge against the lady?"

"There isn't any proof of anything, if it comes to that. You wouldn't know there'd been trouble here, if it wasn't for a couple of corpses, a hospital case, a confession of murder, and a few dozen bullet holes—and that." He jerked his head toward the wreck.

Marot said sadly, "It's a shame about that."

"I don't honestly think the world will be so much worse without him."

"Oh, I didn't mean the chauffeur!"

"The car? Well, yes. A sweet job, that Lincoln. But for all the fact that Mrs. Harris has been losing so much money in the market lately that she feels the need to gyp an insurance company——"

"Sh-sh-sh!"

"—she still can afford to lose a Lincoln here and there."

"I wish," Marot said, "that you wouldn't put baseless and unfounded rumors into words. And anyway, I wasn't thinking of the car any more than I was thinking of the chauffeur. What I consider a pity is that it had to ruin that lovely row of Lady Elizabeths."

Ken felt of his cheeks and his neck, which hurt.

"Is that what they were?"

"Yes. Personally I think Mrs. Harris would have been wiser to set out a hardier rose along an exposed wall like that. A good pink Honorie, for example. Or better yet, pink and white alternately. Now you take those Lady Elizabeths, and in the first place they're late bloomers, and against a wall like that——"

KEN let him talk for some time. Later Ken said:

"That half-witted operative of yours is going to be a newspaper hero, by the way. Swell publicity for your agency."

Marot said gravely, "Yes, of course it

was Hanker who was on the lookout for trouble and chased George Gulick, alias Carstairs, who was a notorious thief—as Hanker knew all the time."

"Oh, yes! Sure. And it was Hanker who tried to commit suicide by plunging straight at him. And it was Hanker who actually killed him, and damned near killed me too. Yes, Hanker is a valuable man! You ought to raise his salary."

"Maybe I will," Marot said solemnly.

"And so our plans went blooey because of a harum-scarum woman who really has plenty of money but who got it into her head that she was in desperate straits, decided to try a skin game with the coöperation of her chauffeur, and made a mess of it. Nelson, of course, was the man who forced open that bedroom window, to make it look like an outside job. He was supposed to hide the stuff somewhere, and then Mrs. Harris would give the alarm. But he got nervous, after finding your detective searching his room. He got the jewel case from Mrs. Harris all right, and I suppose he was getting ready to hide it when the shooting started. That threw him into a panic."

"The papers, of course, will say that Gulick was the master mind and that Nelson was his confederate."

"Sure! Always blame the dead men! But Gulick was a smooth worker, and it's too bad he went in for murder. I suppose you only told him, when you called him from your office, that Sam Lefferts was getting too uppity about his desire to muscle in on the job you were going to pull? You just asked George to warn Sam, to call him off? But Sam wouldn't listen to reason, and George had a quick temper too."

MAROT said, "I don't know what you're talking about."

"And naturally you'd refuse to box a job for a man with a wild-tempered, loose-mouthed bodyguard like that! But Gulick himself wasn't any too reliable. You must have a hard time getting reliable men?"

"Oh, all my operatives are dependable! Like Hanker."

"Yes—like Hanker." Ken sighed. "And now I've got to start all over again."

"I wonder what hospital they're taking Hanker to." Marot didn't seem to have heard. "I must remember to send him flowers."

Ken grinned.

"Send him pansies," he suggested, "for me."

Harry Stork, released from the questioning police inside, came out.

"Say, Ken, I just heard Tony Serris is getting that ambassadorship, and that he's asked you to be his secretary."

"Yes, but I'm turning it down."

Jules Marot laid a hand on Ken's arm.

"Why don't you accept?" The hand seemed to be resting lightly on Ken's arm; but in fact, as only Ken and Marot knew, the fingers were pressing hard. They were strong, those immaculate, exquisitely manicured fingers—and they conveyed a warning which was supplemented, and strengthened, by the glint in Jules Marot's large dark eyes. "The diplomatic service," Marot said softly, "might lead to almost anything. But this life, as a federal detective, what will it lead to?"

Ken thought of the bronze tablet, and of the eight names which could, if necessary, be crowded closer so as to make room for a ninth.

"I don't know," he answered. "That's just why I like it."

"Mr. Serris is a fine man," Marot said. "I think you ought to accept that offer."

The pressure on Ken's arm was released. Jules Marot was again the prim, precise gentleman. He shook hands with Ken and with Harry. He fluttered down to his car, stopping on the way to examine some promising tulip buds.

"You know, Ken, I still think that man is a sissy!"

Ken didn't say anything. He only smiled.

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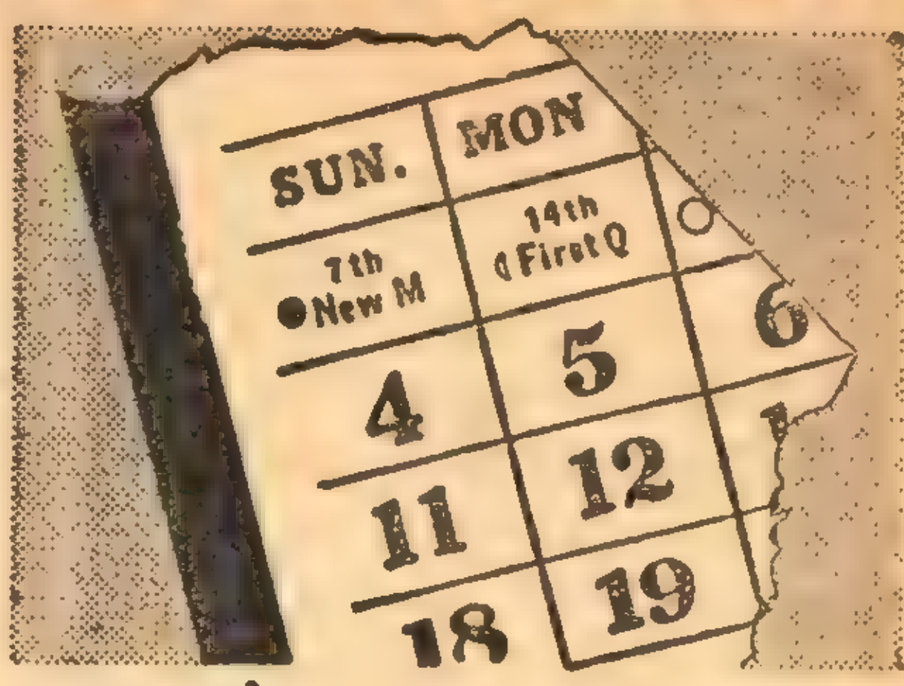

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VEST POCKET EVIDENCE

By O. A. ROBERTSON

Author of "Bugs Beemer—Bandit," etc.

THE little town of Threeforks lay hot and dead under the slanting glare of the setting sun. A pair of dusty riders approaching from the east, and two men standing in front of the livery stable, presented the only signs of life or activity.

"Looks like they've appointed a reception committee in our honor, Sandy," Cub Graham, the younger and shorter of the riders, addressed his companion.

"Anyway," Sandy Fergeson commented, "they can't do anything with us right away. When we were here last they gave us an hour to get out of town. We've still got fifty-eight minutes of it left."

Evidently the men on foot were about to depart and were waiting only for the arrival of the horsemen.

"Howdy, gentlemen," the riders were the first to extend a greeting as they drew up in the shade of the barn and dismounted.

"Hello, Fergeson. Hello, Graham." Bud Hemsley and Joe Riley displayed neither friendliness nor hostility.

"Long way from home, ain't you?" Hemsley added as a sort of afterthought. Ex-broncho fighter, tin-horn gambler, and now temporary proprietor of the local livery stable, he could hardly be expected to discourage patronage of his own establishment.

"Kinda, only our cows won't stay put so we have to get around occasionally and see where they're getting to," Sandy explained.

"Pretty big country to stage a two man round-up, ain't it?" Riley queried caustically. He was the local deputy sheriff.

"Oh, we ain't trying to pick 'em up, but we kinda like to know where they're at," Sandy explained. "In this high, dry atmosphere up here, unless you see 'em once in a while and sweat a little blood over 'em they're a heap likely to evaporate."

"Now that sounds sensible," Riley commented dryly. "I wonder if our stuff don't do the same thing over on your range. I never thought of 'em just fadin' out, but something sure'n hell happens to 'em."

An attendant came out and took the

It Is All Right To Be on the Dodge—Always Provided You Dodge in the Right Direction

horses. Then as they returned to the street the two observed that the stable proprietor and the officer were still engaged in conversation which they broke off immediately, but their demeanor was slightly less frigid.

"Them's good looking horses you fellows ride," Hemsley commented in a stilted effort at casualness.

"They'll do," Sandy concurred. "I wish I could say as much for the hay you're feedin' 'em."

"It's hard to get good hay this time of year," Hemsley apologized. "But if you want to turn 'em out, there's good grass in the pasture."

"Where?" Sandy asked. "It looked to me like your pasture was pretty well grazed off."

"This one here is," Hemsley conceded, "but I've got another one up the creek about a mile that hasn't been hardly touched this summer. If you say so, I'll send your horses up there and get 'em back any time you want 'em in the morning."

"All right, maybe you'd better do that," Sandy said. "They ain't used to bein' in a barn, and they can't eat this musty hay."

"By the way," Riley put in, "there's a horse with your outfit's iron on him running up here on the head of Eightmile creek. A stripped-faced, stocking-legged bay. I reckon he'll weigh about eleven hundred pounds. A pretty good-looking horse. Do you know anything about him?"

"Yes, I reckon we do. We had a horse of that description get away from us last spring, but we didn't know where he went. Thanks for telling us. We had him about half broke when he got away, but I expect he'll be wilder than a bull elk."

"No, I don't think so," Riley replied. "He's runnin' with quite a gentle bunch. I've been close enough to him to read the brand, and there's a corral just above the narrows. You ought to get him in a couple of hours if you get out in the morning before they shade up in the brush."

"We'll get out early," Sandy promised. "But I reckon that means we'll have to keep our horses in the barn. Oh, well, I guess they won't starve to death in one night."

"Suit yoreself," Hemsley commented indifferently, "but I've got horses for hire. You can take a couple from here if you like, and let your own rest until you get back."

"Thanks, we'll do that," Sandy accepted the suggestion.

"My, ain't they sweet and helpful?" Cub commented as he gazed after the men's retreating backs. "When we were here last they wanted to ride us out of town on a rail. Now they'd loan us six white horses and a carriage—if they had six white horses and a carriage."

THE cowboys lingered only long enough to see their horses in company with a number of others headed for the pasture, and then sought the nearest restaurant.

The place seemed utterly deserted, and no waiter came forward to take their order. They seated themselves in a booth well to the back of the room and for a minute waited patiently for one to put in an appearance.

"Don't they have waiters here?" Cub wondered.

"Yes, sure; but they're probably out to supper. Fire three shots as a signal of distress, and some of 'em will come back as soon as they've finished. Shall we try it?"

"Keep still—I think they're holdin' prayer," Cub answered.

Somebody came in from the back and entered the adjoining booth. A low-voiced conversation came to them.

"No, you don't, Pearl. Don't be in a hurry. Sit down. You ain't got nothin' to do, an' I want to have a talk with you."

"I can't do that. I'm not here to entertain customers. I'm just supposed to wait on the tables." It was a feminine voice and contained a note of actual fear.

"No? Well I can't see how you can do anything else." There was a shuffle of feet

followed by an abrupt thump as though some one had been seated with more haste than dignity. "Now set there," a man's voice came low and earnestly. "I'm through foolin' with you. I want to know what you're goin' to do about that kid brother of yours. Are you goin' to come across or not?"

"I don't know what you mean by coming across. I'll pay you for the horse that Jack killed——"

"When?"

"Whenever I get the money."

"Yeah, how long will that be?"

"I don't know, I don't make much here, but——"

"That's it. You're a sap. Workin' here for two dollars a day, when you can make twenty times that at Winston's place."

"I know what you want. You mean make that much for you."

"You're goin' to do it, an' like it. You're goin' to work at Winston's place, or else that brother of yours goes up for horse

stealin' an' robbery just as soon as we can lay hands on him. At that you're gittin' a break. Hell, do you think there's one of them girls down there that would change places with you?"

"Listen, Bud Hemsley," the girl's voice trembled with fear and defiance. "I don't want anything to do with you, Winston, Joe Riley, or any of your rotten crew. Jack diun't intend to steal that horse. He only borrowed it because some other boys were going out to shoot rabbits and he wanted to go along. He didn't know it was your horse. He supposed it belonged to that drunken sheepherder, and expected to get back before the man sobered up. It was his fault that he tied it up with a slip knot so that it choked itself to death, but I'm willing to pay for it. All I want is time."

"What about that roll of bills he took off the shep? Did he need that to shoot rabbits with, too?"

"He didn't take any money, and you haven't a bit of proof that he did."

"No? Well, we can damned easy manufacture some. An' we've sure'n hell got him cinched for horse stealin'. There's just one way out of it for him an' that's for you to come across."

THERE was the sound of a sharp struggle, then a girl, frightened and disheveled, struggled out into the aisle. At sight of the two unsuspected customers, she uttered an exclamation of surprise and dismay, and Bud Hemsley's face appeared around the edge of the partition.

"Eavesdroppin' eh?" he blurted out angrily.

"We were here first," Sandy informed him placidly. "If you didn't want us to hear you should have looked around. Was your conversation that interestin'? We couldn't hear it."

Hemsley glared angrily and seemed about to blaze out in a tirade of abuse, but Sandy had adroitly left him a way out. Turning on his heel he strode out without a retort.

"Who's your friend?" Sandy queried as the pretty, flustered girl waited to take their order.

"He's no friend of mine," the girl said. "His name's Hemsley."

"Yes, I know," Sandy said. "I've met him before. He said something about making it tough for you. If he tries it while we're here, you'll be doin' us a favor by lettin' us know. Maybe we can change his ideas."

"Please don't bother," the girl said. "I'm capable of looking after myself. And I don't want anybody to get into trouble on my account."

"Oh, trouble won't bother us," Sandy assured her. "We've been chased out of this town before."

"That's some recommendation," the girl smiled thinly. "But if it didn't hurt you I guess it won't hurt me. He can probably cause me to lose my job, but I don't have to stay here. This isn't the only town on the map."

Sun-up found the punchers, on hired horses, well on their way to the head of Eightmile creek, but it was several hours later when they finally found and corraled the band of range horses and caught the animal they were looking for. But though they were fortunate in finding one animal, they were equally unfortunate in losing another. Returning to town by way of the pasture, where as a matter of convenience, they had been instructed to leave the borrowed horses, they discovered that Sandy's own horse had disappeared.

"I reckon he's jumped out and gone home," was Sandy's verdict as soon as they discovered that no horses had been taken through the gate in the direction of town. "There's no use goin' after him. If the bronc can carry me to Wyatt Grube's place, I'll borrow one from there. But what we need now is breakfast."

As they entered town a few minutes later they observed a crowd congregated in front of the postoffice but whatever the cause of excitement they had no inclination to mix in, but rode directly to the restaurant.

A much more talkative waitress than the one of the evening before greeted their apparance.

"Lots of excitement," she commented eagerly.

"Seems to be. What's it about?" Sandy asked.

"Haven't you heard? The stage was robbed," the girl said. "Just out of town a couple of miles and only an hour ago. Two men held it up, and got away with six thousand dollars that old man Winston was sending out to the bank."

"They don't know who it was?" Sandy asked.

"No, they were wearing masks, and had their horses covered with burlap. But the deputy sheriff got right out after them as soon as the passengers and driver got in and reported the news. Gosh it must have been exciting. I wish Pearl would come back and tell me about it."

"Pearl? Who's Pearl?" Sandy asked.

"She's my girl friend. Was working here. She was on the stage, but the passengers said that when it was held up she jumped out and ran into the brush. Gee I hope she got away. All the money she had in the world was her railroad fare, and she can't stay here."

"Why not?" Sandy wanted to know.

"Oh, her kid brother got into some trouble, and—you know—there's some fellows here that won't leave her alone."

"How long did you say since the stage was held up?" Sandy asked.

"Well, it left here at eight o'clock, and was stopped about two miles out of town, they said. It's nine-thirty now. It's been nearly an hour and a half. She's had plenty of time to get back. It's been nearly an hour since the others got in."

"Two miles out of town," Sandy commented. "We were ridin' out that way this mornin'. We must have been comin' in at about the time that the robbers were makin' their get-away. It's funny we didn't see something of 'em. Back beyond there is almost all open country for four or five miles."

"Are you sure they went the other way?" Cub queried. "You don't reckon that anybody had a special reason for sending us out there, do you?"

"You mean——?" Sandy began.

"That it might be comparatively easy for some certain parties to slip out of town up the creek an' head off the stage, an' then slip back the same way without anybody ever knowin' they'd been gone. If that did happen, an' a couple of other fellows that aren't very well liked happened to be ridin' out that way, I wouldn't want to be both of 'em."

"I wouldn't want to be even one of 'em," Sandy concurred earnestly.

THEY finished their breakfast in silence, and then rode to the livery stable to pay for the borrowed horses. Sandy fancied that the attendant betrayed a look of surprise at their appearance.

"Where's Hemsley?" Sandy queried casually.

"He's out with Joe Riley chasin' stage robbers," the man informed him pleasantly.

"Just the two of 'em?" Sandy queried. "I didn't figure they had that much guts. Must figure on takin' 'em by surprise."

"What are we goin' to do if they try to stop us?" Cub asked as Sandy paid the bill and they turned down the street where little groups of excited men were congregated in half a dozen places.

"That depends on the drop, I reckon," Sandy informed him. "If they get the drop on us we'll have to stop. But we'll try not to let 'em get it. If they think we robbed the stage, they'll be just as scared of us as we are of them. Watch sharp, and they're not likely to draw on us while we're lookin'."

They were not molested. Evidently it was not yet generally known that they had left town at an early hour, and had but recently returned. But, sooner or later, that information was sure to leak out; and regardless of who the guilty parties were, they themselves were sure to be sought for investigation if for nothing more.

Their immediate destination was the ranch of one Wyatt Grube forty miles away, and with Sandy mounted on the green, half-broken colt it was impossible to make exceptionally good time. The sun was sinking behind the western peaks when they finally approached within a few miles of their destination and for the first time intercepted a regular trail.

"Look, there's somebody ahead of us," Cub commented and pointed at the trail. "Two riders on shod horses. Do you reckon it's Riley an' Hemsley?"

"If it is they ain't lookin' for us," Sandy spoke with more assurance than he felt. "They'd naturally figure that we headed for camp."

"You can't tell what they figure," Cub objected dejectedly. "Only if they did rob that stage, it's a cinch they deliberately framed up to blame it onto us. Gosh, I wish I knew what we was goin' to do. I'd rather shoot it out with 'em than go to the pen."

"Shootin' it out won't help us any," Sandy reminded. "There's been somebody else along here, with 'em or ahead of 'em. Someone on a bare-footed horse."

"Some cowpuncher likely, or maybe Wyatt, or a loose horse. Look there's one down there in the brush. It looks like old Buck. Hell, it is old Buck! What's he doin' here?"

"I don't make that out," Sandy said as they left the trail and loped out to where the solitary horse had emerged from the brush along the creek bottom. "It's my horse all right, an' he's been rode an' rode barebacked."

"He looks all right," Cub said. "You'd better put your saddle on him. He's in better shape than that bronc. But what the hell? Somebody must have stole him."

"Either that or they borrowed him," Sandy grinned. "Anyway it looks like they were through with him. But who in the hell would ride all that distance bareback?"

"Look," Cub pointed out. "Them other fellows have been over here sizin' him up. See, there's the tracks of their shod horses."

SANDY shifted his saddle, and leading the bronco they continued on towards their destination. As they reentered the trail they observed that the two horsemen were still ahead of them.

The tracks still preceded them when a few minutes later they emerged onto the top of a low bluff and gazed down on the isolated homestead of Wyatt Grube. Everything looked peaceful and serene, but they had hardly closed the gate behind them when Wyatt himself left the house and came hurrying out to meet them. Instead

of his usual facetious greeting, his manner was one of angry excitement.

"Hey, you fellows can't stay here," he blurted out explosively. "What the hell have you been up to, anyway?"

"What's the reason we can't?" Sandy demanded. "An' what do you mean, what have we been up to?"

"I mean there's a couple of deputy sheriffs here lookin' for you," Wyatt asserted. "They say you robbed the stage out of Threeforks this mornin'."

"Where are they?" Sandy demanded.

"They've gone on down the river tryin' to pick you up before it gets dark. They say that they trailed you to within a few miles of here, an' have reason to know that you're just about afoot. They were damned curious to know if anybody had taken horses from here, but I give 'em to understand that nobody had——"

"They're cock-eyed liars," Sandy asserted. "They never trailed us nowhere. For that matter we trailed them. We've been behind them all the way. How long have they been here?"

"They got in about an hour ago. They changed horses and went on down the river, but they'll be back to stay all night. You fellows had better git out of here before they come back and find you. What did you want to rob that stage for, anyway? Won't you never grow any sense?"

"We didn't rob no stage," Sandy denied. "If the truth was known I'll bet they robbed it themselves. Who is it after us, Riley an' Hemsley?"

"Yes, but if you fellows was in Threeforks that's about all the evidence that anybody needs that you're guilty," Wyatt asserted, apparently unimpressed with Sandy's denial. "But I don't give a damn who done it or who didn't do it. I'm tellin' you that you'd better git out of here before they come back."

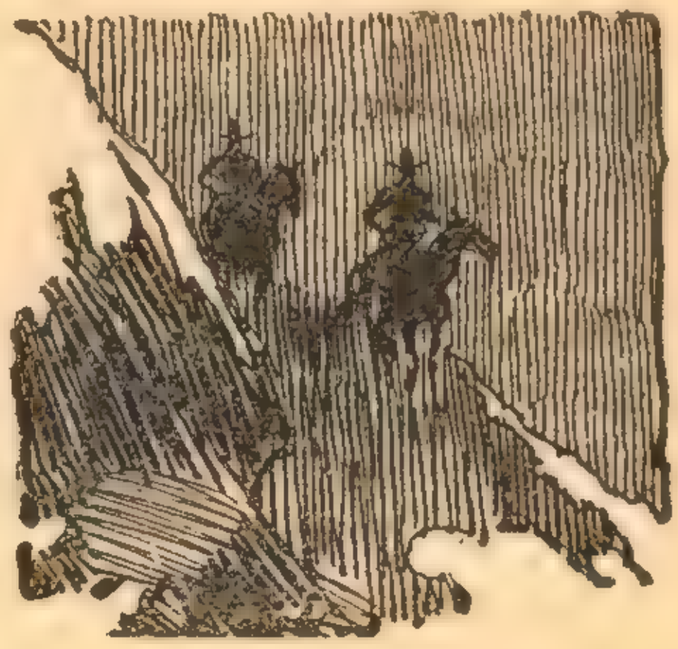
"To hell with 'em," Sandy declared hotly. "We're not goin' to run from 'em an' they can't take us. When they say that they trailed us here, they're lyin' about that too. We left town headed towards camp, an' we know damned well that nobody followed us."

As rapidly as possible he sketched the happenings of the past twenty-four hours as far as he knew them.

"But you say you picked old Buck up out here a few miles back. That's probably why they figured it was you fellows that they were chasin'," Wyatt objected.

"No, they didn't. They could have told with half an eye that the horse had been ridden bareback, and they'd know that neither of us would be ridin' that way. The truth is that they had the job all planned. Then when we rode in last night one of 'em happened to think of this horse of ours, an' it occurred to them to get us out there in the early mornin' so they could lay their damned cussedness onto us."

"Well, anyway, you can't stay here," Wyatt said. "Shootin' a couple of deputy sheriffs ain't no sin, but the law makes it a misdemeanor to kill 'em out of season. If



your horses are too tired to make a gitaway on, you'd better take to the brush an' hide up. I'd let you take a couple from here, but the dep knows what I've got in. He'd miss 'em an' be on your trail for sure."

"Yes, but they'll be huntin' the brush. That's probably what they're doin' now. No matter who they think they're chasin', they figure he's afoot now." Sandy objected. "Say, Wyatt, ain't there some place around here where you can hide a couple of your horses? In the hen house or some place where they won't think to look?"

"They'll probably look in the hen house for you," Wyatt grunted. "If they're huntin' for you they sure won't overlook any-

thing as big as a horse, an' they'll sure be watchin' for you."

"Not if there's a couple of horses missing they won't be. Not close around here, anyway. Let's stick a couple of horses out of sight, an' when they get back you tell 'em that we come an' took 'em. They'll think we're hittin' for the high croppin's."

"I think you fellows are guilty as hell," Wyatt said with his usual disregard of tact. "I'll probably go to the pen myself for aidin' an' abettin' escaped criminals, but if you think it will do you any good I'll take a chance. Run in the horses an' help me stick a couple of 'em away."

THE arrangement was quickly completed and their own horses turned loose. A now unused dug-out that had once served Wyatt as a place of abode during his early years on the homestead, was selected as the most likely place of concealment for men and horses.

It was dusk, but still light enough to see, when the deputy sheriff and his satellite returned and stopped in front of the barn less than thirty yards away. Leaving Cub to keep the Wyatt horses quiet, Sandy stepped to the door of the dug-out and peered out. Their own horses, though they had been turned into the pasture, had not yet left the vicinity and were in plain view. The eyes of the officers alighted upon them immediately.

"Hey, Wyatt, where'd them horses come from?" Riley shouted.

"You know as much about 'em as I do," Wyatt retorted emerging from the interior of the stable.

"When—when did they get here?" Riley demanded excitedly.

"Oh, about an hour ago, I guess. Anyway, it was just a few minutes after you left."

"Are—are they gone, now?" Riley demanded, but already his eyes were sweeping the bunch of horses.

"Yeah, they're gone. Git off an' rest your saddles," Wyatt drawled. "I told 'em you fellows was here an' wanted 'em to stop an' visit with you, but they just changed horses an' shoved right along."

"Good enough," Riley said with regained composure as he swung down. "Hope they run their fool selves to death, but what the hell are they doin' down here?"

"You said you chased 'em down here," Wyatt reminded him.

"I know, but what the hell are they stickin' here for?" Riley attempted to correct himself.

"Believe me they wasn't stickin'," Wyatt assured him. "They changed horses an' got out of here just as quick as shucks'd let 'em. But they said you was a cock-eyed liar about chasin' 'em down here. They said they trailed you."

"Yeah? Then how do they explain that yaller horse of theirs bein' here ahead of us?"

"I noticed he'd been rode bareback. That kinda bears out their story," Wyatt stated.

"Sometimes people notice too much for their own good," Hemsley flared out hotly. His companion silenced him.

"We didn't git close enough to notice anything like that," Riley said. "We just saw it was Sandy's horse an' come on."

"You could see that sweat patch a damned sight farther than you could a brand," Wyatt remarked skeptically. "Ain't you goin' out after 'em?"

"Too late. We'll git some rest an' take after 'em in the mornin'," Riley said curtly.

Wyatt caught and saddled a night horse, after which they all went to the house. It was soon dark.

"What the hell?" Cub complained. "It looks like they don't want us."

"But they sure in hell want somebody, an' I'm just fool enough to stick around an' try to see who it is," Sandy said.

OVER an hour later Sandy caught sight of the dim figure of a man coming from the house. When the fellow entered the stable instead of coming to the

dug-out they guessed that it was not Wyatt.

They waited for some fifteen or twenty minutes, then pushed open the door of the dug-out and stepped outside. They stopped to look and listen, but objects were indistinct. A night hawk zooming close to their heads caused both to duck. They moved swiftly toward the stable.

Then, suddenly, they froze into immobility at the sound of a terse, sibilant command.

"Don't move! Make a sound an' I'll shoot your head off. Damn you, what have you done with it?"

The command was followed by a swiftly stifled scream. But the punchers had heard enough to know that it was a girl who had screamed. The man's voice was that of Bud Hemsley.

"I figgered you'd be slippin' in here before mornin' to steal another horse," Hemsley went on. "Come on—where's that money?"

"I—I'll never tell," the girl said, barely audibly. Sandy knew then that it was Pearl, the girl of the restaurant.

"Oh, yes, you will," Hemsley said. "Either that or you go into the river."

"And if I do tell?" the girl asked in a small, weak voice.

"Then you can go back an' work for Winston, an' be my girl. The stage robbery will be fastened onto them two fool cowpunchers, an' nothin' will happen to your brother."

Cub started to press forward, but Sandy held him with a detaining hand.

"You can do what you like with me, but I'll never do what you want," the girl half sobbed.

"I'm gonna tie you up while I git Riley," the man said. "We'll give you just that long to think it over."

The punchers waited until they saw Hemsley leave the stable.

"Shall I cut her loose?" Cub asked.

"No," Sandy whispered. "She's tied up now an' we don't want her chasin' off through the brush. She's all that stands between us and the penitentiary. She probably can't or won't clear us, but we can't take a chance on losin' her."

Then, suddenly, a light flared up inside the house, and they could see Wyatt, in his underwear, through the uncurtained window.

"What's up? What are you fellers paradin' around out there in your nighties for?" Wyatt demanded.

"Bud thinks he heard somebody prowlin' around out there," Riley said quickly. "Put out that light an' go back to bed."

"If anybody's gonna prowl around out here I'll do it myself," Wyatt said cantankerously.

"Oh, yeah? Well, I don't trust you as fur as I could throw a bull by the tail where them fellers are concerned," Riley said.

IMMEDIATELY the two men went into the house loud and profane language issued therefrom. The punchers could see that Wyatt was being ignominiously put to bed and made to stay there by being wrapped up in his own blankets and tied there with a lasso rope.

"Come on," Sandy whispered, "here's where we wade into that mess."

They reached the side of the house unseen, and waited until the two officers came out.

"Don't be in such a hurry," Sandy said softly. "Just elevate your hands an' turn your faces to the wall."

Both men started violently, and their hands started to clutch at their guns. But they instantly thought better of it, and their hands went up.

"Git their guns, Cub," Sandy ordered. When this was accomplished the men were marched back in the house.

"Say, what is this?" Wyatt demanded from the folds of his blankets.

"Keep yore shirt on, Wyatt," Sandy advised. "Cub, go bring the girl."

"The girl?" Wyatt gasped. "Say, git me outa here."

"You look all right," Sandy said critic-

ally. "You're better able to receive ladies that way than the way you looked a minute ago in that long-legged underwear."

"I hope they send you to jail for life," Wyatt sputtered.

A few minutes later Cub returned with the girl. He was carrying her across his shoulders. Her wrists and ankles were tied with binding twine, and a piece of gunny sacking had been tied over her mouth with a piece of the same string. Cub set her down, then drew a knife and cut her free. The girl seemed torn between fear and outraged dignity.

"Well, Pearl, what started you to robbin' stages?" Sandy asked, not unkindly.

"I didn't rob the stage," the girl said. "I only——"

"You only stole the money," Hemsley cut in viciously.

"Shut up!" Sandy and Riley chorused, but in entirely different tones.

"Better tell us what you know about the whole business," Sandy said kindly.

"When the stage robbers rode up on one side of the stage I ducked out on the other. The brush was thick, and I managed to get away. I kept on going till I came to an abandoned barn in a pasture and I hid in the loft.

"It wasn't long until two men arrived in a great hurry. They had masks on till they reached the barn. Then they jerked the masks off, an' while I watched they pulled up a board in the bottom of a manger and hid the money in it. It was Riley and Hemsley."

"Did you hear anything they said?"

"Yes. They were talking about me. Riley said, 'I wonder where Pearl got to? She was sure making her skirts pop when she hit the brush.' Then Hemsley said he meant to pick me up—that he wasn't going to let me get away.

"After they had left some horses came around the barn. One of them, a buckskin, came up to me. There was an old halter rope there so I borrowed him and came on up here. But I moved that money, and that's why these men followed me up here and were going to murder me if I didn't tell them where it was."

"That story's too thin," Riley protested, addressing his plea to Wyatt, the only disinterested party. "It was these other hombres who followed her up here."

"Why the hell didn't you go back to town an' tell what you'd seen?" Wyatt demanded of the girl, from the depth of his blanket.

"Because I was afraid I wouldn't be believed," the girl said simply. "They would have said I was trying to blame the crime on them because of my brother. I just hoped to get out of the country, and later I meant to send back word where the money was and what I'd seen. But I guess they must have found my handkerchief and so knew it was me. I remember having had it in the barn, but I don't remember of having had it afterward."

Something white was sticking out of the corner of Hemsley's vest, and Sandy suddenly pounced upon it. He brought out a bit of white cambric with the initial P in one corner.

"Is this your handkerchief, miss?" Sandy demanded.

"Why, yes, it is."

"You utter, cock-eyed fool," Riley howled at his accomplice. "I told you to throw that rag away."

"Well, Pearl, I reckon you won't be bothered any more by Mr. Hemsley an' Mr. Riley," Sandy said thoughtfully. "At least until they get out of the pen. An' by that time maybe——" He looked at the girl, and for some unaccountable reason they both blushed.

"Where did you say you hid that money?" Cub asked.

"Why, under the other end of the manger," Pearl said.

"An' Hemsley thinks he knows women," Riley said bitterly. "My God."

"Say, git that girl out of here, will you, so I can get dressed?" Wyatt howled wildly. "Ain't I got any rights on my own ranch?"

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